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"YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A HEAD TEACHER":

PERCEPTIONS OF LONG-TERM MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS ON WHY THEY

STAY IN THE CLASSROOM

by

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Presented to the Faculty of the

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"'YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A HEAD TEACHER:' PERCEPTIONS OF LONG-TERM MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS ON WHY THEY STAY IN THE CLASSROOM," a Doctoral research project prepared by MARANDA TURNER in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of four long-term male elementary classroom teachers. Each of the participants had spent at least 25 years as a classroom teacher at the elementary level in a Pacific Northwest school district. The study utilized a three-interview protocol to learn from the stories of long-term male elementary teachers, in order to discern what encouraged and sustained them to remain in the elementary classroom. Several themes were noteworthy: a) participants stuck by their teaching priorities, b) believed in the importance of the male perspective in elementary schools, c) recognized their impact on all students, and d) genuinely believed that the good of elementary classroom teaching outweighed the challenges. Identified implications for educational practice and policy include effective recruiting of male teacher candidates and collaboration to ensure male elementary teachers benefit from collegial relationships with others like them.

Keywords: male elementary classroom teachers, longevity, male teacher perspective

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Elementary school teachers provide an integral support and base for young children as they develop their understanding of themselves as students and as members of their community. Most preservice teachers enter the field with varying degrees of enthusiasm for their role as advocates, role models, and life-changers, but males striving to serve as elementary school classroom teachers still face what Peter referred to as "the social badge that says you are strange if you want to work with young children" (Jones & Aubrey, 2019, pp. 288-289). As one male participant in Carrington's 2002 study wrote, "I suppose some people might still think that men who go into primary school teaching, particularly early years primary schools, have got suspect motives" (p. 300). Almost a decade later, this sentiment was still recognized and felt by male elementary teachers: "There's a bias almost still against males just for almost social paranoia reasons...I mean people sometimes are freaked out by the idea of males, you know, spending lots of time around four and five-year-olds" (Weaver-Hightower, 2011, p.110). John, in Sargent's 2000 study made a similar comment about parents, saying "Some of them will even be point blank and say, 'Why are you teaching here? Don't you think you should be …? You're very strange to teach" (p. 417). Each of these comments demonstrates the barriers, challenges, and scrutiny males face unique to their gender from parents, colleagues, and their community in general.

These challenges are often cited by male teachers as reasons to leave the elementary classroom early (Carrington, 2002) or leave the education field entirely (Mills et al., 2008). In fact, these challenges impact men choosing elementary education as a major in college (Lovett, 2014), despite their interest in serving their community by working with children. Male elementary teacher recruitment and retention is a challenge in the United States and around the

world (Cruickshank, 2012). A review of the existing literature on the male elementary teacher experience (Cushman, 2007; Ponte, 2012; Sanatullova-Allison, 2010) reveals male elementary teachers describe a number of rewards in the profession but these are often outnumbered by the concerns and stereotypes they face on a regular basis in the elementary school setting.

This chapter introduces this phenomenological study about the experiences of male elementary teachers who have 25 or more years of experience teaching in the K-6 elementary classroom in order to better understand these issues. This discussion includes the background and purpose for the study, the educational problem of practice, and research questions. This chapter also describes the limitations and organization of the study and terms essential to understanding the study's key ideas.

Background

In 2017, McGrath and Van Bergen wrote about the international concerns about the shortage of men in the elementary teaching force, referring to research conducted in Australia, Canada, Cyprus, England, Finland, Ireland, Germany, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Scotland, South Africa, and the United States. An extensive literature search confirms the lack of data and statistical tracking of key descriptors for male elementary teachers in the United States. Only ne source, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), tracks the percentage of female teachers at each level (not just by gender). UNESCO does not include information about the United States for any of the years 2018-2020.

Despite this lack of research, it is clear there is an underrepresentation of males at the elementary level (Bhana & Moosa, 2016; Sargent, 2000; Wiest et al., 2003; Williams 1992). These claims are affirmed by 2020 National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) data - only 11 percent of US elementary school teachers are male, compared to approximately 49 percent of

the US population is male (Duffin, 2020). Yet a simple call for additional male elementary school teachers oversimplifies the complex issue of the unique contributions and distinctive experiences men have working with young children (Coulter & McNay, 1993).

The long-standing arguments for more male teachers center around three key calls: a) a need for male role models (Mistry & Sood, 2015), b) strengthening the teaching profession as a whole (Cushman, 2007), and c) a minimizing of the disaffection of boys with education (Wood & Brownhill, 2018). Yet these arguments have grown weaker over time as more research indicates a higher-than-average male presence in an elementary school does not automatically improve the academic performance of male students (Sevier & Ashcraft, 2009). Despite this, the notion that male elementary teachers bring a positive balance and impact to elementary school communities is still generally accepted. Farquhar (2012) and other researchers (Hedlin & Åberg, 2013; McGrath & Sinclair, 2013; Şahin & Sak, 2016) have consistently argued the involvement of males in elementary education would have multiple benefits for both children and school staff. Ashcraft and Sevier (2006) emphasized the presence of male and female elementary teachers in a school can help children understand how to relate and work with all different kinds of people. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020), the percentage of male teachers was not measurably different between 2017–18 and 1999–2000 at the elementary level (in the United States), indicating most males still do not choose elementary education as a profession.

Educational Problem of Practice

The persistent reasons why male elementary teachers continue to be underrepresented are "complex and multifaceted" (Cushman, 2007, p. 81). Jones (2009) found the low levels of male early childhood teachers could not be linked to a single cause but rather was influenced by a diversity of cultural beliefs and factors. This indicates a need to learn more about the barriers,

motivations, and stories of male elementary educators who "beat the odds" and remained in the classroom instead of moving to administration, accepting roles at the university level, or leaving the field altogether. Greater understanding of these individuals' experiences could contribute support for male elementary school teachers in the classroom over an entire career, changing their tendency to depart for other roles (de Salis et al., 2019; Cushman, 2007; Ponte, 2012; Wiest et al., 2003). Cruickshank (2012) recognized much of the focus of the literature about male elementary school teachers centers on why men do not enter the profession in the first place, rather than identifying what sustains them there. Both Bogler (2002) and Kalokerinos et al. (2016) found female teachers tend to have more job satisfaction than male teachers under specific conditions, revealing there is still much to be learned about the reasons why male elementary teachers remain in the classroom.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of male elementary school teachers who remained in the K-6 classroom for 25 or more years. An examination of the current research has shown male elementary teachers can face suspicion and lack of mentorship in an educational system that lacks support for them, even though they are named as a valuable and rare asset. Male elementary teachers say they believe the work they do is meaningful and contributes in a unique way to society (Bradley, 2000; Mulholland & Hansen, 2003). At the same time, male elementary teachers describe a conflict they experience of needing to find a teaching identity between the "fun guy and the possible perpetrator" (Hedlin et al., 2019, p.111). Understanding the experience of long-term male elementary teachers may enable teacher preparation programs and school systems to more adequately support and retain male elementary teachers.

Research Question(s)

The primary and secondary questions informing this study were:

- How do male elementary teachers (grades K-6) with 25 or more years of classroom teaching describe their experiences in navigating their career path?

    o What scaffolds on the journey helped long-term male elementary teachers navigate their identity as a teacher?

    o What key moments or influences in long-term male elementary school teachers' experiences lead them to remain teaching in the classroom?

Significance of the Study

Research reveals male and female teachers believe that they think and reason about children in different ways (Hansen & Mulholland, 2005; Hedlin & Åberg, 2013). If there is a difference between male and female teachers, this means both sides can learn from each other about pedagogy, student-to-teacher relationships, healthy classroom environments, and other key components of elementary school teaching (Brownhill, 2014; Jones, 2016). Ongoing research into the perception of young children suggests there is a need for males and females in elementary education to help increase positive experiences for children as well as enhance their perception of males in the community (Harris & Barnes, 2009). When students have multiple opportunities to interact with teachers with diverse genders, perspectives, approaches, and interactions with the world, there are social, psychological, and educational benefits (Froese-Germain, 2006; Francis et al., 2008). These benefits can be complex and intricate to measure because studies also have to distinguish between teacher ability and teacher gender (Francis et al., 2008; Hsiao-Jung, 2016; Riddell & Tett, 2010). Yet, in spite of these hurdles, some studies have suggested male teachers help students challenge gendered stereotypes (Ashcraft & Sevier,

2006; Hedlin & Åberg, 2013), offer diverse role models (Mills et al., 2004), and promote

different pedagogical approaches than their female counterparts (Ashcraft & Sevier, 2006;

Carrington et al., 2007).

Pulsford (2014) suggested additional study to "expand the understanding of male

teachers' lived masculinities developed over a lifetime to enhance the much larger research on

male teachers' masculinities in the workplace" (p. 224) may support the field to achieve such

benefits. While McGrath and Van Bergen (2017) recognized the impossible task of determining

whether underrepresentation of males will continue at the elementary level, additional

examination of the personal accounts given by long-term male elementary teachers offer a

clearer picture of the encouragements and challenges faced throughout their careers. Given that

"educational researchers have paid little attention to issues surrounding the low and declining

proportion of male elementary teachers" (Wiest et al., 2003, p. 82), collecting, considering, and

reflecting upon these narratives can help educators develop an understanding of how to improve

and secure the engagement of males in the education of children at the elementary level

(Weaver-Hightower, 2011). This study aligns itself with these identified needs in the research

literature.

Definition of Terms

Two specific terms were intentionally used in the research and interview questions for

this study:

Scaffolds/Scaffolding. Bruner (1978) applied the term 'scaffolding' to educational

processes as a part of his theory on the importance of a spiral curriculum. He defined

scaffolding as "the steps taken to reduce the degrees of freedom in carrying out some task

so that the child can concentrate on the difficult skill she is in the process of acquiring"

(Bruner, 1978, p. 19). In this study, the use of the familiar educational term *scaffolds/scaffolding* encouraged participants to explain the experiences and people who supported their longevity in the elementary education classroom.

Key Moments. Allen (n.d.) defines a key moment as "a situation or event that presents a challenge and demands a response" (para. 2). A person's response to a key moment often determines a future outcome or consequence, which was especially true in the context of this study.

Limitations/Delimitations

Every study has anticipated limitations and delimitations; this phenomenological study was no exception. Intentional boundaries were set to accommodate restrictions in research timeframes and participant access and recruitment. Each limitation and delimitation listed here was closely considered during the data analysis process and was carefully weighed to ensure the boundary established in some way contributed to the manageability of the study.

Limitations

Since this study considered the experiences of a small group (4) of male elementary school classroom teachers, these results likely do not have generalizability. Creswell and Poth (2018) note this as a common limitation of phenomenological studies, while underscoring the importance of focused studies for their ability to yield rich insights.

I relied on participants' self-reported interview data as the source of information about the experiences of participants in this study. In using interview data to the exclusion of focus groups, surveys, or other protocols, it is possible I heard only certain portions or elements of the participant's experiences. This also meant participants did not have the opportunity to interact with others with similar experiences or consider the universality of their experiences with others.

I used a variety of techniques described in chapter three to ensure the themes and lived phenomena I attempt to chronicle are accurate and trustworthy reflections of participants' experiences.

A significant limitation in a phenomenological study is the potential for participants to engage in social desirability biases, even unintentionally. Social desirability bias is generally defined as a participant's tendency to share their reality in line with what they believe will be socially acceptable. Bergen et al. (n.d.) suggest researchers can take the following measures to minimize social desirability bias, all of which I utilized in this study: providing assurances about confidentiality, probing for additional information through the use of follow-up questions, asking for stories or examples to demonstrate a particular claim, or prefacing questions with the acknowledgment that all communities face challenges and there is diversity in people's experiences. I used these in one phase or another of the interview process to mitigate the potential for participants to unintentionally present themselves in ways that "looked good" to others.

As in all qualitative research, researcher bias also had to be monitored in this study. Researcher bias can occur when a researcher has personal biases about a topic that cannot be bracketed, when interview questions lead participants to specific answers, or makes assumptions affecting analysis and interpretation (Chenail, 2011). One key strategy to attempt to eliminate researcher bias from both the findings and data interpretation was through the use of member checks with all participants at various points throughout the study, including transcript review at the end of each interview, the opportunity to review and discuss identified values and themes in each participant's story, and the chance to read and critique participant profiles before the study was finalized. Although no method could possibly guarantee the elimination of all researcher

bias in a qualitative research study, multiple strategies outlined in chapter three indicate significant effort to reduce it (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007).

Delimitations

A key delimitation of this study included my intentional choice to work with male elementary educators who have long-term experiences (25 or more years) in the elementary classroom. Making this choice meant potential changes which have occurred in policy or practice for newer teachers to the field were not reflected in the experiences of the participants I interviewed, especially in terms of scaffolds or supports available at the start of their careers. It also meant current cultural or political influences that presently shape the preparation and early experiences of male elementary teachers was not reflected in the stories shared by these participants.

An additional delimitation was the intended use of a snowball sample. Snowball samples are useful in studies such as this, where it may otherwise be difficult to find participants (Handcock & Gile, 2011), but they can limit representation (Kirchherr & Charles, 2018). I endeavored to be mindful of sampling bias to strive for some diversity across participants. I achieved some in terms of their teaching environments, but race and heritage language were held in common for participants.

Finally, this study focused on the experiences of long-term male elementary teachers, which meant the experiences from middle and high school male teachers were not explored. This choice meant exclusion of male elementary teachers who may have begun their career at the elementary level but moved to middle or high school levels.

Assumptions

As a researcher, I approached the research question and the interviews with a key assumption: male elementary school teachers face difficulties as a part of their long-term experiences in the elementary classroom (Cushman, 2005b; Foster & Newman, 2005; Skelton, 2012; Smedley & Pepperell, 2000). As a result, the questions I posed to participants about their life histories, contemporary experiences, and the meaning of those experiences (Seidman, 2019) likely led participants to identify the more challenging moments in their careers, rather than the larger arc of their experience. Despite this, I found participants focused on the joy of their work and largely reflected on their positive career experiences.

Organization of Study

This study is organized in a traditional five-chapter format (Terrell, 2016). Chapter Two focuses on the key literature which serves as the foundation for the research questions, including research on the underrepresentation of males in the elementary classroom, the perceived barriers male elementary teachers encounter, the reactions and extreme scrutiny they face, and their advice to other males considering elementary education as a professional field. Explanation of the study's methodology, including the research approach, participants, data collection and analysis processes are included in Chapter Three. Chapter Four considers the insights and stories shared by male elementary teachers during the interview process, including descriptions of the scaffolds and key moments participants faced in their career trajectories. The study concludes with a summarization of the study's findings and potential implications in Chapter Five.

Conclusion

Around the world, the debate about the need for male teachers in elementary education has raged for several decades. Different researchers, educational institutions, and advisory panels

have made conflicting claims in recent years (Cruickshank et al., 2018) about the causes of male underrepresentation, along with necessary policy responses and changes that might ensure an equalizing of the genders in elementary educators.

At the same time, a growing body of research suggests more can be done to understand the experiences of males who choose to teach in the elementary classroom (Cruickshank, 2012; Lovett, 2014; Ponte, 2012; Sanatullova-Allison, 2010; Wiest et al., 2003; Wohlgemuth, 2015). This phenomenological study explored the "information-rich" (Creswell, 2016) and contemporary experiences of long-term male elementary teachers. Through their voices and stories, this research contributes knowledge about what it means to be a male elementary teacher for the long term.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review discusses three major themes connected to the longevity of male teachers' careers in elementary education. These include a) the perceived barriers males may face when entering and remaining in elementary education, b) the motivations inspiring males to choose elementary education despite the cultural perceptions of early and elementary education as a feminine and/or lower status career (Drudy, 2008; Weaver-Hightower, 2011), and (c) an exploration of the little currently known about the experience of men who stay in the elementary classroom.

Criteria for Inclusion/Exclusion of Articles

Articles included in this review were peer-reviewed and, with few exceptions, frequently cited by others in the field asking similar questions about the various issues related to males in elementary education. Search terms used included "male primary/elementary teachers," "impact of male primary/elementary teachers," "perceptions of male primary/elementary teachers," "male teacher identity," and "retention of male elementary teachers." Searches were refined with both "primary" and "elementary" because a significant portion of the research on this topic comes from Australia, Canada, Europe, and other areas outside of the United States, where the term "primary" is generally used in place of "elementary." Given that this topic is deeply influenced by ever-shifting cultural norms and understandings of gender, this literature review focuses on articles published after 2005. In some situations, articles with a publication date prior to this time were used if an article was seminal or made a significant historical contribution to the current conversation.

Long-Term Perspective: Challenges from Inception to Retirement

This literature review outlines current findings available about the experiences of male elementary in-service teachers. It is important, however, to also briefly consider the vast amount of existing information about the challenges males face upon entering into an elementary education program and during their student teaching experiences. Understanding the challenges some males face from the very beginning of their careers contextualizes the conditions under which male teachers stay in the classroom for 25 years or more, despite these difficulties.

Both qualitative and quantitative data (Heikkilä & Hellman, 2017; Pollitt & Oldfield, 2017; Stewart et al., 2016) indicate male teachers encounter challenges, stereotypes, and subtle messaging limiting the likelihood they will remain in the profession as early as their initial decision to enter the profession. Participants in Cushman's (2012) study of male elementary teacher candidates confirmed previous research suggesting the journey through teacher education programs for males is often lonely and arduous.

Male elementary teachers interviewed in a variety of studies (Carrington, 2002; Foster & Newman, 2005; Geerdink et al., 2011; Montecinos & Nielsen, 2004; Mulholland & Hansen, 2003; Pollitt & Oldfield, 2017) indicated they often experienced a negative response from others to their chosen career of elementary education. Mulholland and Hansen (2003) found males wanting to enter into elementary teaching were also likely to be criticized by friends for their choice: "a lot of my friends saw it as a bit of a cop-out" (p. 216). Interviewees in other studies have indicated parents can also hold this same opinion, such as in Weaver-Hightower's (2011) study, where all three participants had fathers question their desire to enter elementary education. The irony of encouraging "talented, bright, well-educated" men to pursue something other than teaching was effectively captured in Weaver-Hightower's (2011) study.

Even those male teacher candidates who felt supported by their colleagues or roommates discussed the presence of teasing or good-natured ribbing as a part of their pre-service experience (Weaver-Hightower, 2011). Male elementary teacher candidates often face intense scrutiny from other female students in teacher education programs. They state they not only encounter disapproval but also found their masculinity was continually questioned by others in the preparation program (Carrington, 2002). One interviewee recounted in Mulholland and Hansen's 2003 study: "you felt all the eyes on you...they were saying 'What's he doing here? I just kept to myself and just did my thing" (p. 217). Over time, these relationships improved and the suspicious judgment of peers lessened, but Mistry and Sood (2016) found male teacher candidates often will not remain in programs due to these types of experiences. Over time, studies have also suggested males are more likely than females to drop out of elementary education programs (Moyles & Cavendish, 2001; Pollitt & Oldfield, 2017; Skelton et al., 2009). Clearly, more needs to be done in order to take on the issues of prejudice and stereotyping for men in elementary education (Mistry & Sood, 2016).

Perceived Barriers

Considerable research in the 2000s and 2010s focused on several aspects of male teachers' experiences indicating they face numerous and gender-specific challenges upon graduation from a licensure program (Cruickshank et al., 2018; Mistry & Sood, 2015; Weaver-Hightower, 2011). These include an increased workload due to varying gender expectations and additional demands for them to supervise gender-specific activities (Smith, 2004). The literature also indicates men who go into elementary education are questioned about their choice to accept a salary which may be perceived as less than satisfactory (Cushman, 2007; Jones, 2016). Additionally, research points to the ways male elementary teachers have been uncertain about

whether and how they want to serve as role models for their communities (Ashcraft & Sevier, 2006; Cruickshank et al., 2018; White, 2011). Some even experienced strong negative reactions from family, friends, and society about males serving as caregivers at the elementary level (Cushman, 2005a; Foster & Newman, 2005; Mistry & Sood, 2015). While these challenges are impacted by age, location of employment, and their principal's gender (Cushman, 2008), the literature strongly suggests male elementary teachers do face challenges based on their gender and the range of these complexities remains "scarcely acknowledged inside the primary school, either by the men themselves or by their female colleagues" (Foster & Newman, 2005, p. 342). Additionally, the very public discourse about male elementary school teachers, including challenging and contradictory stereotypes undoubtedly impacts the development of their professional identities (Cushman, 2012; Foster & Newman, 2005; Pruit, 2015).

Lower Status

Cooney and Bittner (2001) interviewed male preservice teachers, male classroom teachers, and male professors to identify the types of issues participants claimed made elementary education a "lower-status" career for them. Their list included low salaries, teaching beyond the basics, improving pre-service education, the way men are recruited into the field, and the advantages/disadvantages of being male in a predominantly female career field. Medford et al. (2013) also described this in terms of lack of opportunity within the elementary classroom: "more so, the lack of upward mobility in a teaching career (as opposed to a career in administration) dissuades males from remaining in the teaching force" (p. 15).

In addition to status concerns, research indicates female staff members may question male teacher candidates' qualifications, or cause male elementary teachers to wonder whether or not they were hired solely because they were male (Cushman, 2005a; Kalokerinos et al., 2016). The

low status accorded to elementary school teaching often causes men who choose the profession to face stigma or even to be considered unfit for other professions (Ashcraft & Sevier, 2006; Williams, 1992).

Elementary male teacher candidates are often asked why they chose elementary instead of secondary (Gosse et al., 2008). Carrington's (2002) study of teacher candidates desiring to enter early primary classrooms indicate this: "If you want to be a teacher - and you are male - secondary teaching is more acceptable" (p. 295). While some of these challenges exist within the field of education itself, the majority of stereotypical comments and behaviors male elementary teachers face come from outsiders. Carrington and Skelton (2003) noted these can include parents with concerns about whether or not their child could be well taught in a male teacher's classroom, especially in early grades. Like all teachers, male elementary teachers must learn how to interact with families, yet there is added stigma and challenge for males who must also deal with familial concerns and stereotypes (Mistry & Sood, 2015; Wiest et al., 2003). These ongoing pressures, combined with a lack of preservice training about how to deal with gender expectation issues (Ashcraft & Sevier, 2006; Foster & Newman, 2005) and a frequent shortage of male elementary teacher mentors for early-career male teachers, can create barriers for males who might otherwise consider a long-term career in elementary education.

Lack of Mentoring or Support Systems

Mentoring has generally been accepted as a meaningful support to help teachers achieve a full career of teaching at the elementary level (Bressman et al., 2018). Ingersoll and Strong (2011) suggested the overall objective of teacher mentorship is to provide support for fundamental institutional and educational questions which tend to arise during the first years of teaching. Male teacher candidates often struggle to find mentors who are able and willing to help

them overcome barriers in teacher education programs. Among these barriers are misconceptions

about their interactions with children (Cushman, 2005a), which their female colleagues do not

experience. Males also experience considerable suspicion (Foster & Newman, 2005; Moosa &

Bhana, 2020; Smedley, 2007) about their desire to teach in the early grades. The reality of this

adverse and mostly unwarranted perception is an issue males have discussed in the literature

around the world and over multiple decades (Børve, 2017; Coulter & McNay, 1993; Cushman,

2005a; Hedlin et al., 2019; Parr & Gosse, 2011; Oyler et al., 2001; Sargent, 2000; Smedley,

2007; Wiest, 2004). This issue is further unpacked under the topic of *Extreme Scrutiny* in a

subsequent section of this chapter.

Sanatullova-Allison (2010) found male teacher candidates claim the lowest job

satisfaction, feel less prepared than other groups, and have the highest attrition rates; yet

mentoring can help districts and teacher preparation programs because as Cooney and Bittner

(2001) described, male teachers seek out other male teachers for support. Some studies have

further indicated female colleagues may be unsupportive of their male peers working with

elementary-aged students (Carrington & Skelton, 2003, Moss-Racusin & Johnson, 2016).

As early as 2000, Sumsion recognized the need for additional research on how male

elementary teachers "cultivate, resist, or acquiesce in gender stereotyping when constructing

their professional identity" (p. 130). After interviewing male teacher candidates in the final

year of their program, Mistry and Sood (2015) found males sensed they had to work harder

than their female counterparts to be viewed as competent to teach early grades, yet they were

unable to obtain mentoring, clear feedback, or guidance about how to feel comfortable in a

highly feminized profession. Previous research confirms male teacher candidates' views that

they would benefit from opportunities to receive mentoring and feedback from same-gender

mentors (Cooney & Bittner, 2001; Malaby & Ramsey, 2011).

An additional challenge is also a lack of understanding of the male-gendered ways of

experiencing the teaching profession (Ponte, 2012). Other researchers, such as Wood and

Brownhill (2018), have argued the lack of males in elementary teaching likely prevents other

men from considering a career in the field.

While research from the late 1990s and early 2000s indicated male teachers could

model appropriate forms of masculinity or inspire more positive behaviors in male students,

later research (Cushman, 2010; Francis et al., 2008; Skelton, 2003) has suggested this is at best

an oversimplification of the impact of gender theory at the elementary level. As expressed by

Francis et al., (2008): "Indeed, there is an absence of any clear discussion of how male teachers

are expected to behave or teach, or the form of 'acceptable masculinity' they are supposed to

represent to boys" (p. 22). Given a lack of mentoring, few programs to support male educators,

and even institutional or cultural assumptions about gender-based biases, it is understandable

that many male elementary teachers continue to seek support systems and spaces where they

can discuss their experiences as males in a highly feminized field (Mills et al., 2008).

Reactions to Male Elementary Teachers

Some male teacher candidates note children react differently to male teachers than they

do to female teachers (Gosse et al., 2008). Male elementary teachers have also indicated they

face strong, negative reactions from colleagues and administration when it comes to behaviors

considered to be "nurturing," such as hand-holding or hugs (Gosse et al., 2008, Hansen &

Mulholland, 2005; Parr et al., 2008, 2011), despite their female counterparts engaging in these

behaviors on a regular basis. Described as a balancing act by Hedlin et al. (2019), male teachers

of young children often feel the tension between wanting to engage in the same ways as their female colleagues, but recognizing the need to take extra steps, such as working with doors open or making sure to always be in the sight of other adults, to eliminate the possibility of being perceived as behaving inappropriately. As one participant in Smedley and Pepperell's study described it, "it is difficult to demonstrate it [care] without getting a negative reaction" (2000, p. 270).

Some males argued they often experienced a double standard when it came to discipline, physical contact with students, and having an assumed lack of nurturing or compassion (Mistry & Sood, 2016; Stroud et al., 2000). Interestingly, many male elementary teachers recognize this difference but are unclear as to why it exists (Ashcraft & Sevier, 2006; de Salis et al., 2019; Lahelma, 2000). Pruit (2015) found many of the gendered practices currently existing in learning environments for young children were either to "avoid misperceptions" or leave males "above reproach" (pp. 523-524) so parents would not misunderstand a male teacher's intentions or work.

Several studies indicate people assume male elementary teachers are able to provide strong modeling for male students with behavior problems, thus many male teachers find their classrooms are filled with students who cause behavior issues, regardless of the length of their teaching experience or the depth of their expertise in the area of discipline (Cushman, 2005a; Mills et al., 2008; Montecinos & Nielsen, 2004).

Conversely, recent studies in Canada and Australia have suggested secondary-aged male students deny the importance of their teacher's gender as a factor impacting their success in the classroom (Watson, 2017). Students in at least four studies (Hutchings et al., 2008; Lahelma, 2000; Spilt et al, 2012; Watson, 2017) indicated other characteristics, such as content knowledge, personality, or willingness to get to know students were more important to their academic

success than the gender of their teacher. Martin and Marsh (2005) noted boys and girls are "no more or less motivated and engaged in classes taught by females than they are in classes taught by males" (p. 332). This same study, however, acknowledged a slight preference amongst boys and girls to have personal or emotional problem-solving support from a teacher of the same gender.

A 2014 study of 453 male teachers in Trinidad and Tobago revealed a lack of parental support and inadequate administrative support were the top two reasons given for leaving the teaching profession (Joseph & Jackman, 2014). In addition to these challenges, males described a sense of vulnerability to accusations or negative reactions from colleagues, parents, and even administrators (Parr & Gosse, 2011; Sargent, 2000). Sargent (2000) even went so far as to suggest that much of the energy expended by male elementary teachers in his study was designed to avoid any possible situation which could be construed negatively, suggesting this detracted from their everyday functionality in navigating classroom tasks. As captured in Parr and Gosse, (2011), one male elementary teacher stated, "stress is the main aspect of teaching and this definitely causes huge stress when someone questions your motives, character, integrity, etc." (p. 384). Male participants also explained their situation as being without support, particularly from administration, which "year after year, it wears you down" (Parr & Gosse, 2011, p. 384).

A final space in which male teachers experience negative reactions is communication. At times, the communication styles of male elementary teachers can be misunderstood by female colleagues and administrators as uneasy, anti-social, or confrontational (Ashcraft & Sevier, 2006; Cruickshank et al., 2018). This can cause a sense of isolation or discomfort and either or push male teachers out of elementary classrooms or away from the profession. At the same time, male elementary teachers are also often faced with contradictory communication and messaging about

their presence in schools, especially in the younger grades (Mills et al., 2008). Male elementary teachers must learn to balance the perspective of being seen as a key and prized commodity, alongside sometimes being viewed as a potential danger to children (Martino, 2008; Pruit, 2015). These contradictory messages, along with normal communication differences between male elementary teachers and their female colleagues can create problematic issues (Palmer et al., 2020). Parr and Gosse (2011) argued many of these negative reactions, stereotypes, and judgments could be ameliorated if the number of males working in elementary classrooms were to increase. Yet increasing the limited number of male elementary teachers is its own set of nuanced and challenging issues.

Motivating/Sustaining Factors for Men in Education

Despite the existing barriers for male teachers at the elementary level, research indicates a number of motivating factors for why males choose to enter and remain in elementary education. These include their original inspiration for becoming a teacher, their ability to serve and inspire their students and community, and their ability to make large-scale, positive impacts on equity and social justice issues in their communities.

Inspiration

The rationales drawing male elementary teachers to the profession vary widely. One male teacher interviewed by Cushman (2010) indicated "what I bring to teaching as a man is hopefully nothing different from what women bring" (p. 1215). Yet other male teachers suggested their presence brings balance into the school community (Jones, 2016; Ponte, 2012), supports the idea of school as a family (Cushman, 2010), counteracts negative societal models of masculinity, (Sevier & Ashcraft, 2009; Wood & Brownhill, 2018), challenges prevailing stereotypes about male elementary school teachers (McGrath & Sinclair, 2013), and even potentially encourages a

diversification of skills in the future workforce (Martin & Marsh, 2005). In Jones' (2016) study of male practitioners in Early Childhood in England, participants explained their inspiration for wanting to work in the classroom through comments such as "an exciting environment," "the need to be creative within my work," "the love of children and the joy of childhood," and "trying to improve outcomes for children and families" (p. 417).

Research from Bradley (2000), Mills et al. (2008), and Stroud et al. (2000) indicates many male elementary school teachers remember at least one male teacher who contributed positively to their life in some way, leading them to contribute back to their community in a similar fashion. Cushman (2005a) also noted many male elementary teachers felt drawn to serve children and their community, leading to high job satisfaction. The ongoing work of Gosse et al. (2007, 2008), Parr et al. (2008), and Parr and Gosse (2011) indicates the importance of early experiences working with children, which can prompt an interest in entering the elementary classroom as teachers. Other teachers find becoming fathers shaped their decision to work with young children (Jones & Aubrey, 2019).

Some male elementary teachers would "like to see more men get into it [the profession]" (Ashcraft & Sevier, 2006, p. 139) because they believe their presence provides nurturing and stability in the school environment, particularly for children who may be in need of additional or different examples of how men can act and serve in society. In the minds of these male elementary teachers, the increased presence of males in elementary school classrooms could also challenge society's current normative conceptions of manhood for future generations (Ashcraft & Sevier, 2006; Cushman, 2010; McGrath & Sinclair, 2013). Ponte (2012) interviewed 11 pre-service and in-service male teachers - all participants indicated positive male role models were an underlying inspiration for becoming teachers themselves.

Diversity in Approaches

Compared to their female colleagues, male elementary teachers may provide different approaches and interactions with curriculum materials, problem-solving, worldviews or perspectives, and social awareness (Børve, 2017; Cushman, 2010; Montecinos & Nielsen, 2004; Wohlgemuth, 2015). It is possible their presence can send very specific messages to students about the importance of academics for males (Wiest, 2004). Recent studies also seem to suggest students (both male and female) who attend elementary schools with male teachers tend to ascribe less stereotypical attributes to male teachers than children who do not. Ashcraft and Sevier's (2006) study emphasized the presence of male and female elementary teachers in a school can help children understand how to relate and work with all different kinds of people and teachers.

Foster and Newman (2005) have argued male elementary teachers are in a unique position to fight against often-imposed stereotypes and identities placed upon males in a predominantly female profession. In her study of the lack of males in the Hawaiian school system, Ponte (2012) wrote, "understanding male-gendered ways of experiencing the teaching profession might help us address the current shortage of male diversity in teaching" (p. 44). This is not to suggest that male elementary teachers must take on the "burden" of being role models for male students, since ongoing research has begun to question whether or not male students will only follow the model of male teachers (de Salis et al., 2019; McGrath & Sinclair, 2013; Sevier & Ashcraft, 2009; Spilt et al., 2012). Yet, interviews with male elementary teachers seem to indicate they believe male teachers bring alternative pedagogical styles and ways of running a classroom (Jones, 2016). Indeed, many male teacher candidates want to help students learn about important topics in the world in unique, different, or interesting ways

(Cushman, 2010). As one male teacher put it, "we [men and women] do things different because we are different individuals…some students learn better my way and some her way; we complement each other" (Cushman, 2010, p. 1216). This indicates the potential for male educators to open conversations about the impact of teacher instructional choice on students.

Studies considering the impact of male teachers on children's gender stereotypes indicate a positive connection between presence and children's perspectives (Harris & Barnes, 2009; Mulholland & Hansen, 2003). In one study, male kindergarten students were more likely to identify male teachers as someone with whom they could build relationships (Harris & Barnes, 2009).

Positive Social and Societal Impacts

Increasing the gender diversity of elementary school teachers speaks to important goals around equity and representation goals for both students and communities (Froese-Germain, 2006). Among the many arguments made for the need for more male elementary teachers, one which continues to have traction within the general public is the idea that a balanced teacher workforce is more representative of society in general (Cushman, 2010). It is plausible to believe increased gender diversity in traditionally masculine and feminine occupations will broaden the range of acceptable interactions and aspirations for all students (Ashcraft & Sevier, 2006). To this point, Wiest (2004) indicated "a lack of gender diversity may limit the range of strengths brought to the teaching and learning experience" (p. 62). Just a few years later, Cushman (2010) found male elementary teachers are in a powerful position to challenge stereotypes and to even encourage the diversification of skills, both in the classroom and in other realms of society. Francis et al. (2008) argued the presence of male teachers early in the education system can cause disruption of gender stereotypes in teachers

and in students, as did Hutchings et al. (2008). After interviewing over 300 third grade students about ways in which they hope to emulate their teachers, Hutchings et al. (2008) concluded, "if we are to challenge such stereotypical notions, then teachers of young children clearly have a particularly important role to play in offering children less stereotyped images" (p. 153).

Research indicates the presence of more male elementary teachers has a positive impact on male and female students alike (Carrington et al., 2007; McGrath & Sinclair, 2013). Male elementary teachers, alongside their female counterparts, can ensure a balance of classroom activities, challenge stereotypical "male" or "female" behaviors, and model their willingness to explore gender issues in elementary classrooms (Cushman, 2008; Foster & Newman, 2005; Francis et al., 2008; Skelton et al., 2009). Ultimately, as Foster and Newman (2005) stated after interviewing male elementary teachers in Australia, "primary schools need good teachers of both sexes who have a strong image of self as teacher" (pp. 353-354). Skelton et al. (2009) echoed these findings from a student perspective, finding third graders in their study conceptualized the importance of gender in different ways than their teachers did; the majority of students focused on the professional abilities of their teachers, rather than their gender.

What Research Indicates about Males Who Stay in Elementary Education

In this third and final theme, this review focuses on what is presently known about the experiences of male elementary teachers who stay in the profession long-term. Many state the motivations that brought them to the profession (desire to give back to their community, serve others, and promote social justice) became sustaining factors for their persistence in the profession. At the same time, qualitative research studies with male elementary teachers from around the world (Ashcraft & Sevier, 2006; Foster & Newman, 2005; Mulholland & Hansen,

2003) indicate male teachers who persist in the profession have unique struggles in a female-dominated field.

"You can do better than that"

Male elementary teachers often endure spoken and unspoken pressure to move from teacher to administrator. Williams's (1992) classic work about the glass elevator for men in "female" professions found this pressure so great that male elementary teachers must actually fight to stay in place, particularly in early grade classrooms. Given the nature of change in educational institutions, male elementary teachers often face pressure to move up to higher grades, shift to middle school teaching, or move into administration. This may be because administrative positions are "higher-status" within a profession often considered to be low-status (Foster & Newman, 2005). Even teacher candidates at the beginning of their career sense this; Montecinos and Nielsen (2004) reported only 23% of the 40 teacher candidates they interviewed expected to remain classroom teachers throughout their careers. A 2014 study of 453 male teachers in Trinidad and Tobago suggested the less teaching experience a male elementary teacher held, the more likely he was to consider "greener pastures" (Joseph & Jackman, 2014, p. 78) within or outside of the profession. Carrington and Skelton (2003) discovered one in four male teachers will move on to becoming headteachers, while only one in thirteen female teachers follow the same path.

Male elementary teacher candidates and teachers also seem to recognize better acceptance of their choice to teach at the elementary level when it is paired with a desire to move into other aspects of education (Kalokerinos et al., 2016; Mistry & Sood, 2016; Pollitt & Oldfield, 2017; Smedley, 2007). When asked about discouragement, George stated, "the only comment that's ever really discouraged me was my parents saying 'you can do more.' Then that

gave me pause and I had to really ponder what 'more' would be for me" (Weaver-Hightower, 2011, p. 108). Adrian, an elementary teacher from Australia stated a friend's mother told him, "I'm sure you can do something better than that" (Foster & Newman, 2005, p. 347). A participant in Cushman's (2005b) study noted, "the parents think the higher up the school you teach, the better you are as a teacher, which I think is totally wrong" (Cushman, 2005b, p. 230).

Extreme Scrutiny

Male elementary teachers who stay in the profession often indicate they experience problematic and unjustified scrutiny from students and families during their careers (Carrington, 2002; Foster & Newman, 2005; Mills et al., 2008). Jones and Aubrey (2019) named this the "social fear" of men working with young children (p. 288). In a study exploring teachers' experiences with hostility, suspicion, and overall scrutiny by families, administrators, and colleagues, Carrington and Skelton (2003) found stakeholders expressed concerns and reservations about males working with children. Despite this, "no males… recounted any incident of hostility or suspicion directed at them by children" (p. 260).

An early 2000's survey of male primary teachers found their top job-related concern was being stereotyped as pedophiles or homosexuals (Wiest et al., 2003). Male teachers' concerns for being falsely accused have been well-documented in previous research studies (Carrington, 2002; Carrington & Skelton, 2003; Cushman, 2005a). Some male elementary teachers have explained these concerns limit their ability to be their natural selves in the classroom, which Parr and Gosse (2011) termed "weariness" (p. 389). Moss-Racusin and Johnson (2016) noted compared to identical women, potential male educators were "significantly more likely to be viewed as posing a safety threat to the children in their classrooms" (p. 388).

Studies from the field indicate female teachers generally trust male teachers within their school but recognize males are generally stigmatized because their presence implies a potential threat to the safety of children (Pruit, 2015). Hedlin et al. (2019) expanded on Pruit's notions of a discourse of suspicion about men, indicating these suspicions could be expressed openly or may be noted by male educators in the way they are watched or marginalized.

Male elementary school teachers also spoke at length in interviews with various researchers about concerns about their interactions with female students, both in terms of pedagogical concerns and physical interactions in the classroom (Ashcraft & Sevier, 2006; Cushman, 2005a; Wiest et al., 2003). Some even expressed concerns about girls recognizing the vulnerability of male elementary teachers and they could fabricate accusations against a male teacher in retaliation for disciplinary or other issues. A 2018 study of 57 Australian male elementary school teachers by Cruickshank et al. noted, "gender-related challenges concerning physical contact were rated as moderate or extreme by more than half of the participants in this study" (p. 59).

Potential Advice to Others

Most male teachers in these studies appeared to accept their need to function as role models to be positive examples and difference makers in their communities (Mills et al., 2008; Sevier & Ashcraft, 2009). It also appears they perceive developmental stages of a professional identity as a journey to be negotiated for oneself and within the learning community where they teach (Foster & Newman, 2005). One example of this would be the assumption male teachers are often expected to be accomplished disciplinarians (Mills et al., 2008). However, male teachers suggested this is an unreasonable expectation: "it's something

inside you that makes you good at disciplining, and it doesn't matter if you're a man or a woman" (Cushman, 2010, p. 1216).

Foster and Newman (2005) theorized the qualities of a good elementary teacher are largely androgynous, so teaching can and should be viewed as a gender-free zone. In describing his wish for other males in the field, one interviewee stated males "can come into the classroom and teach and not just coach" (Montecinos & Nielsen, 2004, p. 6). In Jones' (2016) study of male practitioners in Early Childhood in England, participants explained the value of their work in the classroom through comments such as "an exciting environment," "the need to be creative within my work," "the love of children and the joy of childhood," and "trying to improve outcomes for children and families" (p. 417).

Conclusion

A detailed review of the current research from the United States and other countries indicates male elementary teachers deal with suspicion, scrutiny, and additional perceived barriers as they enter into the classroom and strive to remain there (Hedlin et al., 2019; Jones, 2016; Pruit, 2015). While not every aspect of being male in the elementary classroom is negative, Weaver-Hightower (2011) claimed the so-called 'benefits' of being male in a highly feminized workforce may actually be detrimental to those males who would prefer to teach rather than be pressured into administration. There are clear reasons while male elementary teachers choose the classroom, despite the many challenges and barriers they face, including the belief their work is ultimately important and gives something to their community they could offer in no other way (Bradley, 2000; Jones, 2016; Ponte, 2012).

After decades of international discussion on the issue of underrepresentation of males in elementary education, the literature points to a need not only to examine the "problem" of

underrepresentation itself, but to understand the factors contributing to the issue in the first

place (de Salis et al., 2019; McGrath & Van Bergen, 2017; Parr & Gosse, 2011; Pruit, 2015;

Weaver-Hightower, 2011). Understanding the experiences of long-term male elementary

teachers is an important step in enabling educational systems to develop systems of support for

recruiting and sustaining them.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of male elementary teachers who had 25 or more years of experience teaching in the K-6 elementary classroom. This chapter outlines the study's design and methodological approaches, including data sources and analytic considerations. It also outlines the ethical considerations and actions which ensured a credible and trustworthy study.

Research Question

The broad question guiding this study was: How do male elementary teachers (grades K-6) with 25 or more years of classroom teaching their experiences in navigating their career path? Two additional questions were also considered:

- What scaffolds on the journey helped long term male elementary teachers navigate their identity as a teacher?

- What key moments or influences in long-term male elementary school teachers' experiences lead them to remain teaching in the classroom?

Purpose

This research sought to understand what kept males in the elementary field, along with key moments of their careers, and the meaning participants made of their teaching lives. This study matters because the lack of presence of males in elementary school classrooms has been an ongoing issue in the United States and across the world for decades (Bhana & Moosa, 2016; Sargent, 2000; Williams 1992). By striving to better understand the experiences of those who remain in the classroom, rather than focusing on those who leave the classroom, I sought to understand the potential highlights and challenges influencing their decisions. Better insight into

these issues could support recruitment and retention of additional male elementary teachers (Pollitt & Oldfield, 2017).

Research Approach

Phenomenological research seeks to understand the essence of an experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study embraced a qualitative, phenomenological approach to develop a deeper understanding of the perceptions and experiences of male elementary classroom teachers who had 25 or more years of experience teaching in the elementary classroom. This study also used what Creswell & Poth (2018) call "emergent design" (p. 44) to allow for shifts in the research plan as data collection proceeded. Creswell and Poth (2018) state narrative researchers collect stories that "shed light on the identities of individuals and how they see themselves" (p. 69). The use of transcendental phenomenology allowed me to identify significant statements, create themes, and describe both the *what* and *how* of participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

The Researcher

As a researcher, I wanted to better understand the influences and impacts of the situations and experiences male teachers encounter throughout a career. As a professor of teacher education in a small liberal arts university, I sought to understand the motivations and experiences of male elementary teachers as a means of positively influencing my approach to educating my male elementary teacher candidates.

I served as an elementary school teacher for 11 years in a variety of classroom levels and other roles and as a K-12 instructional coach for seven years prior to my current work in higher education. I wanted to understand more about the experiences of male elementary teachers in order to deepen my awareness and appreciation for the joy drawn from the work. Since I am not

a member of this group, I came to this study as somewhat of an outsider. I did, however, have background knowledge since I had an understanding of public elementary schools. I had also seen some of the ways in which males in elementary schools are treated by faculty, leadership, and parents; but these observations were anecdotal and did not necessarily lead me to draw any one particular conclusion. Further in the chapter, I reflect on the study's ethical considerations and my commitment to bracketing (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Setting

The setting for this study consisted of a particularly unique moment in time in national and global events, namely the COVID-19 global pandemic, which necessitated school shutdowns and significant changes to daily life. This season coincided with the culmination of my doctoral coursework, where I had explored my interest in the topic of male elementary teacher candidates, finding a dearth of research, which offered an opportunity to explore this in my dissertation. Online spaces like Zoom were of primary importance in educational instruction, research, and collaboration at this time. The intersection of these various factors provided opportunities for participants to reflect on their careers in the midst of significant political and cultural shifts.

Additional information about each participant's instructional setting and context participant is provided in Chapter Four.

Participants

Four male elementary school classroom teachers who had taught in the elementary classroom for 25 or more years comprised the participant group for this study. Typical sample sizes in a phenomenological study range from 1 to 10 persons (Starks & Trinidad, 2007), so this number of participants offered the opportunity to understand the essence of their experiences. Each participant was individually approached by the researcher, provided with a brief overview

of the study and participant protections, and then asked to affirm their willingness to engage with the work of the study. Creswell and Poth (2018) encourage researchers to spend considerable time with participants to gather their stories, which was the rationale behind using a smaller sample with a deeper, collaborative focus on collecting and telling stories.

Selection Process

In this study, I was not concerned about having a maximum variation sample or stratified sample as much as I was interested in cases that were "information-rich" (Creswell, 2016, p. 210). I initially thought snowball sampling would be an effective way to recruit participants for the study. Snowball sampling is used in cases where it may be difficult to find potential participants. Working from the premise that male elementary teachers encourage and support one another (Cooney & Bittner, 2001), I hoped initial participants might be able to use their network to encourage other potential participants to come forward for the study. This did not actually work at all, which is reflected in the participant's stories, because several of them had never had an opportunity to work with other long-term male classroom teachers. Given the difficulty of finding a male elementary classroom teacher with longevity in the field, (NCES, 2020) I sent 24 recruitment emails (Appendix A) to my own contact network to find the four participants who agreed to share their story. I worked closely within the ethical parameters for a phenomenological sample to ensure all ethical considerations were upheld. Yet this strategy did not help me find participants, necessitating a change in plan.

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Data Sources

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Data for this study was collected through a series of three separate interviews with each participant for a total of 12 in-depth interviews. Each interview was between 55 and 90 minutes in length. The use of interviews for this study aligned with the practice of using interviews as the

general data source for phenomenological studies due to their flexible and open-ended style and their focus on actual experience of participants (King et al., 2019).

Data Gathering Procedures

Seidman's (2019) in-depth interview protocol was employed for interviews with participants to explore the three key themes of life history, contemporary experiences, and reflections on participants' experiences. In order to "discover the extraordinary" (Van Manen, 2016, p. 298) of participants' ordinary experiences, I audio-recorded and transcribed all interviews for deep analysis. Appendix B contains the list of initial interview questions.

Each of the three interviews had a specific purpose in the study. The first interview allowed me to understand participants' contexts of their work and careers. Seidman (2019) describes this as understanding the life history of the participant, especially including a look at participants' experiences over their career arc. Generally, this interview helped me to establish rapport and begin to understand the support systems which kept them in the classroom. In accordance with Seidman's (2019) recommendation, this first interview was focused on the 'how' of their life histories, such that they were able to "reconstruct and narrate a range of constitutive events in their past family, school, and work experience that provide a context for exploring" (p. 22).

The second interview focused on participants' "contemporary experiences", which allowed me to unpack the elements of each participant's story with additional details and clarifying questions (Seidman, 2019, p. 39). In this interview, we explored many of the potential events or day-to-day life experiences. The second interview was also a space for clarifying previously shared information and verifying their comfort with my interpretations of the first

interview. A third interview and final interview gave participants time to reflect on the meaning of their experiences in their long-term commitment to elementary education.

Taken together, the three interviews ensured that I worked to understand each participant's experience from their point of view (Seidman, 2019). Since each interview was spaced about a week apart, participants and I reflected on and revisited their meaning-making iteratively. Together, we clarified the accuracy of their accounts and identified the noteworthy themes in their stories. Van Manen (2016) insists that the purpose of an in-depth phenomenological interview study is to attempt to understand the experience of participants, rather than control or limit the description of their life history. I committed myself to this by repeatedly asking them to reconstruct their experiences and reflect on the meaning of those experiences, which required time and commitment from all of us. This was especially true in terms of understanding each participant's thoughts about what kept them in the classroom for so many years.

Seidman (2019) calls this iterative process across the three interviews an "act of attention" (p. 19) that encourages participants to deeply reflect on the meaning of their lived experiences. Each interview held a unique role within the process and was essential to the cumulative nature of the three-interview sequence. I became aware of the need to find balance between providing space for participants to share openly about their experiences and ensuring enough focus to collect the information that was most relevant to the research questions (McCracken, 1988). This interview format and ongoing final member checks allowed me to do this in meaningful ways which included participants in each step of analysis.

Given the situation with COVID-19 at the time of the study, I conducted all interviews via Zoom. This constituted a common online setting for the study, despite participants joining

from their respective locations. Using an electronic platform for interviews had multiple advantages, namely that they could select the most comfortable and appropriate place for them to participate. Some chose to interview with me in their home, others in their classroom; each one chose an environment supporting the level of privacy they deemed necessary. Although there were challenges with long-distance interviewing, necessity and opportunity made it the most appropriate means of data collection for this study.

Data Analysis Procedures

Based on the match of methodology and research purpose, I patterned my analysis after Ashcraft and Sevier's (2006) method of interviews with participants that are recorded, transcribed, and coded using inductive and deductive coding. These researchers highlighted key moments in the experiences of the male elementary teachers they interviewed, organized by essential considerations and complications that arose in participants' stories. I paired this model with Creswell and Poth's (2018) spiral analysis process of reviewing transcripts for emergent ideas, describing and classifying codes into themes, and developing interpretations based on the patterns revealed.

Organization

Organizing the vast amount of interview transcript text required a carefully managed data archive. I used file nomenclature to clearly track participant identity and interview sequences to effectively manage raw materials, partially processed data, coded data, analytic memos, and data displays (Miles, et al., 2020). I also kept digital folders for each individual, including separate files for each interview recording, interview transcript, and coded transcript.

It was essential to maintain a "researcher's notebook" (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to help me organize and process information from each set of interviews. I also found the researcher's

notebook key to keeping my narrative data organized by categories. This notebook became the place where I kept jottings and analytic memos as I built my codebook, helping me ensure each phase of analysis was cohesive. It was especially helpful as I worked from raw interview data through data analysis with an intention to "get the story right" (Stake, 1995), interweaving participants' perspectives with my careful interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The notebook also provided me a place to document my own reflections and interpretations of the data, where I used a color-coded system to track particular influences or stories of great meaning for each participant.

Coding

Given that I collected interview or text data, I used common analytic methods of qualitative data coding which included first cycle and second cycle coding methods (Saldaña, 2015). In first cycle coding, I used in vivo coding, which allowed me to review participants' exact words to describe interesting or unusual information. Values coding allowed me to reflect on participants' values, attitudes, and beliefs (Miles et al., 2020). In order to develop a sense of themes indicated from the first cycle of coding, my second cycle of coding consisted of pattern coding to help me discern assertions and themes. Keeping a codebook as a part of my researcher's notebook allowed me to document the "distinctive boundaries" for each code (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Jotting

Emerson et al. (2011) define a jotting as "rendered scribbles about action and dialogue" (p. 29), which allow the researcher to document "fleeting and emergent reflections and commentary on issues that emerge during fieldwork and especially data analysis" (Miles et. al, 2020, p. 86). Jottings supported the coding process by drawing my attention to additional ideas

and concerns within the essence seeking process. Jottings also allowed me to track connections between prior shared experiences and current stories expressed during the series of interviews. At times, jotting allowed me to see where I needed to ask clarifying questions in a subsequent interview. This practice enabled me to track evidence connected to different analytical assertions as I sought answers to my research questions.

Analytic Memos

Multiple researchers have discussed the importance of analytic memos as a part of ensuring an accurate and deeply reflective qualitative inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2020; Saldaña, 2016). Used alongside jottings, analytic memoing provided a format for me to thoughtfully move from data to codes to themes. Analytic memos serve a variety of purposes, including developing a network of patterns across participants' stories, moving codes into meaning clusters, and identifying/addressing ethical dilemmas arising during the study (Saldaña, 2016). I used analytic memos and jottings not only to seek themes in the data, but also to ensure a trustworthy and credible study.

The use of multiple interviews with multiple participants created a unique combination of challenge and perspective in this study. I sought to share each participant's story while also considering the themes across their stories. Seidman (2019) encourages researchers to search for connecting threads and patterns among excerpts from each participant based on the naturally arising categories evident in the interviews. This effort required thoughtful tracking and data organization in my researcher's notebook. This helped me look for connective threads across the interviews and develop them analytically, searching for how participants' experiences were "laden with complexity" (Seidman, 2019, p. 23). Thus, attention to these processes within my researcher's notebook allowed me to see what was important in each individual's story as well as

across the participants' accounts, especially once categories of analysis began to emerge from the interviews and cycles of coding (Saldaña, 2016; Seidman, 2019).

Ethical Considerations

Creswell and Poth (2018) state researchers must have plans to "address ethical issues relating to three principles: respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice" (p. 54). Respect for persons in this study meant ensuring participants' consent, privacy, and their right to withdraw from the study. I made this clear through a standard informed consent form (Appendix C) and ongoing confirming consent at the beginning and end of each interview. I did this in adherence to Josselson's (2013) assertion that participants often share information that is surprising or unexpected to themselves, which necessitates the informal process of securing ongoing consent. In subsequent interviews, I always asked participants if they had any questions about the previous interview's transcript or wanted anything removed.

Concern for welfare is described by Creswell and Poth (2018) as ensuring protection for participants, including not placing participants in any sort of risk. I do not believe the study put participants in any sort of *extreme* risk because they primarily shared the positive situations and experiences that allowed them to remain in the classroom, despite many pressures to do otherwise. Generally, these experiences do not put participants at personal or professional risk. However, I was still careful to take appropriate measures to mask any potentially identifying details. This minimized the risk to participants while still allowing me to share and analyze their data with integrity. All research has risks for participants and to the best of my knowledge and ability, I ensured participants were comfortable with the information shared in this study.

Justice, in the eyes of Creswell and Poth (2018), is the fair and equitable treatment of participants in a study from recruitment to study completion. The need for justice extends to

issues such as disclosing the purpose of the study, data collection, and data analysis, especially the recognition of one's own assumptions and biases throughout the study.

IRB

Beyond the need to attend to my own potential biases and subjectivity in this study, it was also important to ensure participants were protected throughout the study. Included under this umbrella of protection was my prioritization of participant confidentiality (Josselson, 2013), obtaining informed consent (Seidman, 2019), and avoiding colloquialisms or stereotypes when writing about participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I closely followed the IRB requirements laid out by George Fox University for a qualitative phenomenological study to ensure I did not violate the essential rights of participants. A copy of the IRB approval document is included in Appendix D.

Subjectivity

As with all researchers, my own experiences, priorities, and subjectivity influenced the decisions I made throughout the study. I stayed reflexive about the ways my own biases and perspectives shaped my interpretations of what participants shared. While I endeavored to identify and hold loosely my own conclusions about what I might find, I participated in reflective conversations with critical friends and my dissertation chair about the ways my viewpoints shaped the research. Recognizing these viewpoints allowed me to be aware of not only what biases I brought into the research process, but to carefully identify my "subjective I's" (Peshkin, 1988) and consider their influence on my interpretation and analysis.

One area of subjectivity I intentionally considered is what Creswell and Poth (2018) call "the art, practice, and politics of interpretation and evaluation" (p. 17). I cultivated awareness of the spaces in which I articulated participants' experiences as well as the spaces where I

attempted to explain how they made sense of those experiences. These are two very different viewpoints. Peshkin (1988) stated, "I can consciously attend to the orientations that will shape what I see and what I make of what I see" (p. 21). I carefully attended to these differences by verifying with participants that I correctly understood their story, working to conduct an ethical study characterized by what Yin (2016) calls "reflexivity" (p. 46), or the interactive effects between researcher and participants.

Theoretical Bias

Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) wrote "theoretical bias is difficult to counteract" (p. 272). As a researcher, it was important to recognize I held multiple theoretical viewpoints on those at the heart of this research, including the ideas that there is pressure on male elementary educators to leave the classroom for other work (Montecinos & Nielsen, 2004) and it is difficult for males to remain in the elementary classroom (Hedlin et al., 2019; Moss-Rascusin & Johnson, 2016). I also recognized my belief that males who select "a pink collar" job (Kalokerinos et al., 2016) likely have one or more of the following: a) extraordinary courage; b) an incredible model of an elementary educator in their lives whom they deeply respect (Bernard et al. 2004; Cruickshank, 2012); and/or c) a strong system of support allowing them to follow this path (Mills et al., 2008). It was important to cultivate reflexivity throughout this process to ensure I did not seek to "find" these stories in what participants shared with me (Josselson, 2013). Member checking and bracketing allowed me to explore participants' lived experiences while being mindful of these theoretical biases.

Bracketing of Potential Bias

Phenomenological study requires multiple steps throughout the research process, including a recognition of one's own assumptions, axiology, biases, ontology, and other

influences impacting a researcher's interpretation of participants' stories (Terrell, 2016). I acknowledge Tufford and Newman's (2012) assertion that as a qualitative researcher, I was the "instrument for analysis across all phrases" (p. 81) of this study. As a result, it was imperative to engage in the practice of bracketing in order to allay the effects of my own biases and assumptions about this topic, throughout the entirety of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

As defined by Drew (2004), bracketing is the "task of sorting out the qualities that belong to the researcher's experience of the phenomenon" (p. 214). I believe the use of bracketing granted me a way to engage in deeper reflection about the stories shared through the data collection process, contributing to a "more profound and multifaceted analysis" (Tufford & Newman, 2012, p. 81). Starks and Trinidad (2007) emphasize the importance of bracketing to ensure honest self-reflection on prior knowledge and assumptions, while acknowledging a researcher cannot abandon her beliefs, but merely set them to the side.

As I worked to code the experiences of males in the elementary classroom, it was extremely important to ensure the veracity of my analysis. Recognizing, as Peshkin (1988) suggests, that subjectivity is always present in our research, I was mindful of the ways in which my own experiences (e.g. seeing how males have been treated by administrators and parents; my own positive and negative experiences with male elementary school teachers; etc.) demanded consideration within the study. I did this through analytic memos and thematic mapping, to track and confirm the evidence for the patterns I saw. I maintained this documentation in the form of color-coded tables of data for each participant with time stamps from each interview to track the themes and patterns. I also relied on the use of member checks and audit trails to document data collection and analysis processes in further confirmation of the patterns I discerned.

Member Checks

Member checks, or the active involvement of participants in validating analyzed data (Birt et al., 2016), is a practice used to authenticate the accuracy of qualitative interpretations (Doyle, 2007). Member checking can take a variety of forms, including review of the interview transcript itself, review of interpreted data, and review of synthesized or analyzed data. Stake (2010) claims member checking is an essential part of credible qualitative research because it is a form of triangulation, confirmation, and validation of having "heard right" (p. 123). In this study, member checks took two forms: 1) asking participants to verify their interview transcripts to confirm their comfort with me using anything they said, and 2) asking participants to verify my interpretations were representative of their experiences. The power of member checking was twofold: it not only ensured accuracy but helped me consider potential and unintended insensitivities in my analysis of the data. Given that the intent of this study was to accurately document participants' lived experiences, the use of member checks was well aligned with the approach of transcendental phenomenology.

Audit Trails & Critical Peers

While analytic memos can serve the function of establishing an audit trail (Starks & Trinidad, 2007), the use of an external critical peer can create a space for researchers to challenge and reconsider the analysis. Audit trails allowed me to document and trace the steps of the study, ensure neutrality as much as possible, and attempt to better understand the results of my study, including the "awareness that any actions taken on my part may affect the outcomes of the study" (Terrell, 2016). In the same vein, Roulston (2010) emphasizes the active participation of an external critical peer at key moments in the data analysis process to ensure accurate description and consideration of discrepant data. My chair primarily served in this role to help

me make sense of the research process and ensure I understood and represented the nature of participants' experiences.

Trustworthiness & Credibility

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) use the researcher's lens as a means of establishing credibility in a study, calling it the "critical perspective" (as cited in Creswell & Miller, 2000). In the critical perspective, researchers are admonished to explain their assumptions, lenses, and influences over their interpretations through reflexivity, collaboration, and peer debriefing. With the recognition that "the trustworthiness of results is the bedrock of a high-quality qualitative research" (Birt et al, 2016, p. 1802), I took a series of steps to ensure trustworthy research.

One of these was to follow advice from Creswell and Poth (2018), who recommend researchers engage in at least two validation strategies that involve examination of the researcher's lens, the participant's lens, and the reader's lens. I attended to these different lenses by seeking a confluence of evidence (Eisner, 2017), following Geertz's recommendations to develop a "thick description" (Stake, 2010), building rapport with participants through long-term engagement and member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and using audit trails (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Each of these steps ensured the interpretations and conclusions presented in my study were an accurate representation of participants' meaning (Creswell & Miller, 2000). As previously described throughout this chapter, this study intentionally attempted to employ each of these strategies to ensure a trustworthy and credible study.

Potential Contributions of the Research

Over the last 50 years, researchers around the world have studied, investigated, and questioned the lived experiences of male elementary school teachers. That research, however, has primarily focused on the reasons why male elementary educators leave the field, rather than

the reasons that motivate males to remain in the field, especially in a teaching role. Cruickshank et al. (2018) and Pollitt and Oldfield (2017) found that gender-related challenges need to be considered in order to be addressed. This study responded to the need for additional research related to the specific challenges male elementary educators face. In an extension of this thinking, de Salis et al. (2019) urged future researchers to study the impact of recruitment and retention policies. Cruickshank (2012), Mistry and Sood (2016), and Skelton (2012) also emphasized the need for the workforce in elementary schools to be diverse and representative of society. These researchers also indicated that in order to achieve this, educators must understand the experiences of the group most in need of recruitment and retention.

This chapter outlined the organizational structures, data collection and analysis plans, and other methodological elements informing this study. The following chapter offers findings derived from the stories of the long-term elementary teachers who participated.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This phenomenological study was centered around the primary question of: How do male elementary teachers (grades K-6) with 25 or more years of classroom teaching describe their experiences in navigating their career path? It also considered the secondary questions: What scaffolds on the journey helped long-term male elementary teachers navigate their identity as a teacher? and What key moments or influences in long-term male elementary school teachers' experiences led them to remain teaching in the classroom? This chapter offers the stories collected from four male long-term elementary teachers from January to March 2021 and an analysis of the data collected.

This chapter is organized into three sections; the first provides a brief profile of each participant, based on information shared during the interview process. Each profile offers a basic timeline of their teaching journey, their educational background, and other details pertinent to their identity as a male elementary educator. The second section of the chapter outlines themes derived from participants' stories and experiences. The final section presents some assertions clarifying the unifying experiences across these participants.

All information was collected through individual interviews conducted via zoom. Each interview session lasted approximately 60 - 90 minutes. Generally, interviews were conducted over a series of three weeks, with each interview falling on the same day of the week. This allowed participants time to review the previous transcript for accuracy and preview the next interview's questions to promote reflection and preparation.

Participant Profiles

Four male elementary teachers opted to participate in this study and shared their experiences for this research. All four male participants taught in the elementary classroom for

25 years or more. Each one taught at the elementary level across at least two Northwest schools; two also taught in different states before teaching in the Northwest. All participants had been in their current district for over two decades. At the time of this study, all of them were current teachers; three were instructors in grades 2-5 and one was teaching as a substitute teacher due to a very unique COVID-19 related need for the district. These men worked for three different districts and likely did not know one another. They did not interact with one another as a part of the study. A table with demographic information about the participants can be found in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic Information about the Long-Term Male Elementary Teachers at the Time of the Study

Name	Years of Elementary Classroom Teaching	Years in Current District	Current Grade Level
Max	25 years	21 years	2nd grade
David	32 years	28 years	5th grade
Luke	27 years	27 years	substitute
James	27 years	21 years	4th grade

In the following paragraphs, I briefly outline each participant's history as a means of unpacking their experiences in the female-dominated field of elementary education.

Max: "It's okay for me to be who I want to be as a teacher."

Max worked as an elementary school teacher for 25 years in two states and three districts. Max grew up in the Northwest and has worked for 21 years in his current district in a variety of different classroom roles. Max came from a family of teachers - both his parents, as well as his paternal grandparents, were teachers. Despite this background, Max stated, "but that's not why I became a teacher at all. I didn't even I didn't go to college to become a teacher." After various experiences at his small college as an undergraduate, Max realized his originally chosen career

path was not a match for his personality and desired life goals. A series of "horrible jobs" led him to reflect positively on his experiences as an Outdoor School counselor as a high school student. The sense of fulfillment he found there inspired him to enroll in education courses.

Max had the opportunity to work with male elementary classroom teachers throughout his career, but his first opportunity to work with a male on his grade-level team did not occur until the tenth year of his teaching journey. It altered Max's perceptions of himself as a teacher as well as his impact on students, "once I started working with males and saw their styles, I was able to, kind of . . . get the essence of who I was as a teacher, what I valued, what was important to me." This helped Max begin to accept and cherish his identity as a male elementary school teacher, empowered to bring his "goofy, silly, Star Wars-loving, rock-and-roll listening self" into the classroom. He emphatically stated, "you need to bring it [things important to a teacher] to the classroom because that's you. And that's important for your kids to know that you care and that, that there's something you're passionate about, I think that's huge."

Max established this identity shift as enabling him to enjoy teaching and stick with it despite challenges because he recognized the importance of making connections with students who did not have positive school experiences: "I'm going to have an emotional impact on students and an educational one, too, but that is going to change them and me. And I'm willing to stick around for that." Across the series of interviews, Max articulated the importance of relationships with colleagues, administrators, and students as supporting his success as a classroom teacher.

Max's relaxed and reflective narrative style underscored his non-negotiable priorities: to support students in becoming life-long learners in a safe and stable learning environment: "whether they know that's what they want or not, that's what I'm going to give them."

Throughout our conversations, Max revealed his values of compassion, empathy, care, respect, and problem-solving. He consistently reiterated his teaching priorities as being about relationships (rather than standards or curriculum) and emphasized the obligation teachers carry to help their students love learning. He described his impact as more "emotional than educational," believing his work as a male elementary teacher had a positive influence on students.

David: "Any issues I've had have not been because of my gender."

David described himself as someone who needed to be "challenged, but it's got to be a comfortable challenge." He was commonsensical and utilitarian in sharing his journey as a male elementary classroom teacher. David did not begin his career with the intent of working with elementary-aged children. His parents were deeply involved in their school community life in various roles, which meant David was often at school or "playing school" with his sister. After helping his sister coach a high school softball team, he decided to complete his teacher preparation for grades 7-12 and coach high school athletics. His first position was in an extremely small rural school district, which he left after four years when he realized he was getting "too comfortable" in a community too far from his family. Ultimately it was important for David to return to the area where his family was located, so when he had opportunity to pursue a master's degree with an elementary education endorsement, he enrolled in the program while working as a high-school substitute teacher and resource instructor at Outdoor School.

David made a point of saying that in his whole teaching career, he never applied to teach a grade lower than fifth grade. He jokingly claimed he "fell into elementary school teaching" when he realized fifth grade would be the perfect spot for him because he figured, "I couldn't screw them up too much because they already had [schooling] so if I messed them up, they could

recover when they got to junior high." Despite this tongue-in-cheek comment, David was very sincere in talking about the importance of his work as a professional in the community. He viewed his role as a male elementary classroom teacher as a deeply valued and serious calling.

David spoke frequently about the community in which his school was located; despite its changes over the years, he felt it important to invest in the community. He described the importance of the school community helping him when he first arrived in this small town, small district setting: "the staff was very helpful. . . when I first was here, they looked out for you, helped you out, and were very supportive. And that was a very big part of the factor [of remaining in the district]."

At the time of this study, David was in his 28th year at the elementary school in the district, having mostly taught fifth grade, with a few years of fourth and sixth grade also in the mix. Upon arrival at his current school, he was assigned sixth grade with one of only two other male classroom teachers at the school. When the district moved sixth grade to the middle school about four years later, he elected to remain at the elementary level and was moved to fourth grade, which he called, "a fun age after I recalibrated myself," describing the shock from moving to end of the year sixth graders to the beginning of the year fourth graders. He looped with the students up to fifth grade when a long-term teacher (the only other male classroom teacher in the building after the sixth-grade teacher moved to the middle school) retired after approximately 35 years of teaching fifth grade. Since then, he has remained at the school teaching fifth grade with a variety of different teaching partners - the vast majority of them female - and frequently used the word "adapt" to explain his experiences working as a male in an almost completely female workplace.

As David discussed his journey as a male elementary classroom teacher, he spoke candidly about what he does and does not bring to the classroom, how he collaborates with female teaching partners to meet the needs of all students, and the different perspective he can offer to some male elementary-aged students. He succinctly summarized these experiences by saying,

So we just get along with each other, and you appreciate each other's shortcomings and your different personalities because I have lots of quirks that aren't positive. But my teammates have learned just to leave me alone. They don't take it personally - it's just me. So we forgive - we forgive and forget a lot, there's a lot of apologies made in my years here, and a lot of apologies I've given myself for forgiveness on both ends so, we just make it work (Interview 1, 02/01/21).

Being "left alone" was important for David, because he viewed independence and being treated as a professional as an important part of his work as a teacher. His teaching priorities of establishing student relationships and serving as a stable male role model for students while also acting as professional support for his grade-level teaching teams were themes across each of the three interview sessions. He also emphasized the "turning point" of moving from sixth grade to an intermediate elementary grade as significant because he could not be certain he would have stayed on at the school if he had moved to junior high school.

Luke: "You have to embrace the awkwardness in order to survive."

The second-oldest of eight boys, Luke recognized the role of faith and "destiny" in his journey and identity as a male elementary classroom teacher. With no male teachers in the family, Luke was deeply influenced by his birth order with siblings in a large family of eight boys. As he chronicles it, "for the entire time that I was growing up, there was virtually always

somebody in the family, who was, 8, 9, 10, 11, or 12 years of age." His ability to recognize his brothers' different skills and ability enabled him to be very "in tune and empathetic" to children, especially boys. This influenced him to follow teaching as a vocation because "I think that all of that just kind of formed my brain. The way that I function, the way that I saw the world."

Luke did not start as an elementary education major; his bachelor's degree, which he obtained in the early 80s, was in history and so he became certified in secondary education. After spending some time working as a high school substitute, he quickly realized he "didn't really connect with those ages." Luke's love for serving young children was solidified by his work and experiences at an alternative elementary school for emotionally disturbed children, as an instructional assistant. He recalled the vast majority of students being boys and stated "I actually really absolutely loved doing that. And so that showed me that the age I did really well with were the elementary-aged kids." He would continue to hone his skills and area of focus throughout his career, based on those powerful initial interactions with male students at the alternative school.

Following his time as an instructional assistant, Luke studied theology in graduate school and earned a master's degree. During this time, to supplement his income, he worked as a substitute teacher at the elementary school level. These experiences reaffirmed his previous experiences that "I was most inclined and had the aptitude for teaching in the elementary school...I had an absolutely wonderful relationship with those students, [that] doesn't always happen for substitute teachers."

Four years into his pastoral service, Luke described receiving a clear call into teaching that "superseded a call to what was the ordained ministry. So, in other words, it has been pretty powerful." Among the many teaching priorities Luke articulated during our conversations, he shared that answering the call to teach meant overcoming some of the societal messages about

acceptable male roles. He purposefully ignored these societal messages in order to be a "different kind of male" in the lives of his students. He prioritized kindness, validated student assets, and worked to help all students be understood, especially those (generally male) students who had been marginalized, misunderstood, or labeled as "bad."

Luke attended a large urban university in the Northwest for his elementary licensure, where he was one of at least two other male candidates in the cohort. Despite the presence of other males in his preparation program, it was rare for Luke to work with other males on his grade-level teams throughout most of his career. The few he encountered usually left within a short time or took on other educational roles (e.g. PE teacher, school counselor). Seven years into his career, he became half of "the fifth-grade team" with one other female teacher. He spent the following decade in partnership with her, a teacher who appreciated and sought out his perspective on different disciplinary situations with children. For Luke, this cemented the importance of his calling as an elementary teacher, his core values of connection over curriculum, and the importance of compassion and relationships in his work as a teacher. As he recounted it, his efforts to be a kind and compassionate adult male created a "safe haven" in his classroom for students who often had not experienced a kind, compassionate adult male in their personal or academic lives prior to their time in his classroom.

At the time of this study, Luke had worked for 27 years as an elementary school classroom teacher, not including his time spent as an instructional assistant or as a substitute teacher. Overall, Luke's experience reflected satisfaction over his relationships with students, along with amusement and tribulation about times of isolation or awkwardness as the (often) lone male in a female-dominated teaching and learning environment.

James: "There's so much joy that I get from it that even the hard stuff doesn't seem hard."

James's teaching career began in the Midwest before he moved to the Northwest in the early 2000s. For the last two decades, he has taught in a mid-sized rural K-5 elementary school, working primarily with fourth and fifth-grade students. A powerful and insightful storyteller, James often relayed different elements of his teaching journey through the stories of students and others who impacted him.

James did not enter college wanting to be a teacher, despite growing up in a family of male educators. Both his father and grandfather worked for many years as teachers and in other roles in the school system. Yet this was not why he entered into elementary education: "I think the reason that I ended up here was because I didn't want to end up here!" Originally intending to work as a police officer, James realized a few months into a policing career that he did not want to serve on the corrective side of a community, but on the "preventative end." He enjoyed his teacher preparation courses and was awarded a teaching award after successfully completing student teaching.

Immediately after completing student teaching, James took a long-term substitute position in the school where he did his student teaching. Rather than feeling disappointed with a substitute position, he enjoyed substituting because it allowed him to focus on the creative aspects of his work as an elementary classroom teacher. Although he could have stayed at that school in a permanent teaching position, he moved to another midwestern state. Through a series of unique and unusual events and connections, James began teaching elementary aged English Learner students (ELs) in a large urban school district. A year later, he began teaching sixth grade in the same school building. He characterized these years as positive and influential, both in terms of the unique opportunities he was able to provide students and the support of other

male educators in the school. A male administrator encouraged James to provide students with "every opportunity they don't have," and supported James in keeping a pet cat in the classroom and providing students who demonstrated improved attitude, behavior, or effort a camping trip to James' family farm in the rural Midwest over every Memorial Day weekend.

James' opportunities to work with male elementary teachers were varied. He described many different educators who supported him at the start of his teaching career in the Midwest, including administrators, counselors, and other classroom teachers. Yet when he arrived in the Northwest, he noted, "for many years I was the only male classroom teacher in our building." In his relaxed style of storytelling, he laughingly added, "we did hire another male classroom teacher last year, so we doubled our number!"

Across our conversations, James named his core values of building community, developing relationships focused on respect, and teaching students life lessons through vulnerability and being his authentic self. He considered his role as a teacher to be about far more than covering curriculum or meeting testing benchmarks. Instead, James emphasized the importance of relationships, both as a means of effective teaching and as a source of fulfillment to continue to "keep coming back." He planned to persevere in his classroom as long as he continued to "honor the profession" and "contribute a valuable commodity" to the community.

Emergent Themes

In considering the different moments, influences, and scaffolds participants described, four themes became evident. Participants attributed their longevity as teachers to a) sticking to their teaching priorities, b) a belief in the importance of the male perspective in elementary schools, c) recognition of their impact on all students, and d) genuine belief that the good of elementary teaching outweighed the challenges.

I identified these themes both as a result of analyzing participants' patterns of word and thought, and by reflecting on similarities across their stories and experiences. The use of in vivo coding allowed me to "prioritize and honor each participant's voice" (Miles et al., 2020, p. 65) while value coding allowed me to identify and explore their values. Repeated readings of the data and movements between these coding processes made these themes clear (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Teaching Priorities

The vast majority of educators at any level gradually develop priorities in teaching over time and these four male elementary classroom teachers were no exception. While each of them carried out their teaching priorities in different ways, all highlighted the importance of developing relationships with students, creating a love of learning with life-long lessons and celebrating student growth. These priorities kept them motivated and dedicated to their classroom teaching.

Relationships

All four participants indicated that fostering relationships was among the non-negotiable elements of their classroom learning environment. Their methods for developing relationships vary according to their different personalities and teaching styles, but they each believed relationships and community offered safe learning environments. Early in his classroom work in his urban Midwest school, James realized,

> You have got to make a connection with the room [of students]. And I realized, you know what, all of this other stuff will come, but if I don't take the time to know who you are, *Why would you listen to me*?

James used this recognition to build a sense of community and forge relationships with students through the intentional and ongoing use of strategies such as family meetings and dialogue journals, which allowed him to both be vulnerable and candid with students while also getting to know their experiences and interests. James went on: "you don't get there [student respect for one another] by moving only through your subject matter. You have to take time to develop who they are as a person."

Likewise, Max emphasized the importance of building relationships, saying, "that's my first priority when I get new kids, is get to know them. Because if you don't know them, then you don't know what they need to be successful." Luke noted student relationships as a vehicle through which he created a better classroom environment:

> Being able to make that connection was far more important than even correct strategies or teaching. You know, well, procedures and whatnot. I mean, those things are important too. But, if you have a relationship that is positive, that is where there's really a true connection with a student beyond just being like, well, we're going to learn math right now (Interview 1, 02/05/21).

Participants did not buy into the idea that males are 'better' at classroom management, because they "lay down the law," as Luke stated. Instead, they argued strong classroom management comes from well-developed relationships rather than their gender. David made similar comments about the difference between classroom management and relationship with students, "they [the rules] can bend a little bit because that's how I made impact for students who needed that. Yes, I set boundaries, but if . . . you're black and white, not gray, it doesn't work." James suggested something similar, saying,

When I do my family meetings . . . I'm building community. I don't have a lot of behavior

issues. Typically I don't. And people say well it's because you're a guy. Well, that might

play into it for sure, but I think it's also because we spend so much time getting to know

each other. It's really hard to be a jerk to somebody that you respect. You're not gonna

treat them poorly if you respect them you don't have to like them as your best friend but

we treat each other with respect and I don't expect you to be best friends but you better be

kind to each other (Interview 1, 02/10/21).

In different ways, each participant articulated the importance of clearly delineated

relationships on their classroom longevity, their enjoyment of the day-to-day work of the

classroom, and finding their overall fulfillment as a classroom teacher. Each of them described

how ultimately, their teaching priorities and classroom work always "circle back to

relationships" as Max explained it. He went on to suggest, "it's easy to get caught up in the

minutiae when what they [students] really need is to know that you care about them."

David and James affirmed this priority. David indicated he became better at

"strengthening my relationships with all people" as a result of being a male elementary teacher

while James noted relationships require time, intentionality, and vulnerability.

Creating a Love of Learning Through Life-long Lessons

In addition to the teaching priority of relationships and connection, each participant also

reflected on their priority to help students love learning. They pursued this goal by teaching "life

lessons" with significance beyond the current school year.

Max wanted students to love to learn:

Kids still have a long way to go in their career and in life, and if they know that learning

is fun, that they're smart, that they can take a challenge and overcome it. That they can

learn, that they can be successful, that they can achieve high expectations - that stuff is way more important than, you know, the curriculum we cover in second grade (Interview 2, 01/27/21).

Max went out of his way to create unique experiences or learning situations for students, to help them develop curiosity in various areas. In discussing his priority to create "big" memories for students, he said, "nobody remembers their elementary school career. I mean, you might remember your teacher's name. But nobody remembers doing writing; nobody remembers doing math; it's, it's the big stuff, it's the fun stuff. It's those memories that will last."

Luke cultivated relationships by balancing academic development with whole personhood development:

Obviously, I was always working towards the state standards as much as I could. But on the whole, in the large scheme of things, in the big picture, trying to help these children to become better human beings, regardless of their academic prowess, to have them to be kinder, more loving - seeing that they were going to be part of society and that they're going to be part of the community. And then if I could get them to desire that more, or deeper or to have a sense like well that's really what's really important in life. I think that one of those core values or motivators that I had (Interview 3, 03/08/21).

Similarly, David considered the importance of personal development a key part of his work as a male classroom teacher. Given his small school environment, David also tapped into extracurricular activities to support and encourage his students with "human" lessons:

You're reminding them as they get older that sports are an awesome thing but to be able to have sports, you have to be successful in school. They build upon each other and you hear that from a lot of people, but hearing from another person besides their parents or

the counselor or whatever. I think it was just one more thing that helped them keep that

road going, they were already okay - they weren't going off the road - but just one more

person, encouraging them to keep the path and run let them know that school is

important. Along with that, they can meet together, you know, 50:50 is the balance to be

successful (Interview 3, 02/22/21).

James noted one of his most important roles was to help students develop their true

character, to fix mistakes when they made them, and to allow themselves to be both strong and

vulnerable at the same time.

I think our best lessons are the ones that show our humility. . . that's what shows your true

character and growth and understanding and learning, that's where that all comes in. So I

think that's important as a person and maybe that's why I stay in education because it

allows me to continue to do those things, you know? I have to develop the safety in my

class to be able to have all of the kids feel that, too, especially our boys (Interview 1,

02/10/21).

They all recognized the ways life-long lessons could improve students' understanding of

the world and their roles in it. Each of them helped students understand learning and school are

important, not just for the sake of learning, but for a more satisfying school career and life.

Ultimately, Max summed it up by saying, "everyday school is important, but there's some other

things that kind of drive me more than covering the curriculum . . . especially laying the

groundwork that school is good. Learning is good. It's important. I like learning."

Student Growth: An Intention to Reach All Students

Each participant noted their commitment to helping students grow into whole people.
Max articulated this by saying "social, emotional, academic, all of it - whatever they need, but
you don't know...[what they need] until you get to know them by building a relationship."

Finding ways to connect with students and celebrate student assets was essential for these
teachers. Max and James emphasized the ways they tried to support students who had been
traditionally misunderstood or disregarded by others in their learning communities. They helped
male students understand they weren't "bad" - just at times not clearly understood. In a separate,
yet related way, David found himself frequently supporting female students and their mothers
who potentially did not have a positive adult male relationship present outside of school.

Male Students Aren't "Bad"

Luke recalled multiple interactions with male students who had adopted this stereotype,
of being a "bad" student, attributing some of this to students only having had female teachers
prior to fifth grade.

> I saw that the boy had - was reacting to - this negative image that he had developed like I
> guess I'm a bad boy; he would feel bad about it...and so he would just keep reacting
> against it because he didn't feel accepted, he didn't feel loved or cared for. And so then he
> had this idea like, I must be really bad (Interview 1, 02/05/21).

He went on to describe how these behaviors eventually changed when the student had the
guidance and leadership of a male classroom teacher for the first time:

> Once he was in my classroom things really started to turn around. . . And he came over
> and he was looking all downcast and yeah I know I was being bad again. And I said,
> "Whoa, stop." And I got his attention completely and I said you were not being bad. You

aren't bad. You're active. You have a lot of energy. But that's it. And that was it. From

that moment on, he realized that there was nothing bad about him. And that I had fully

accepted him for who he was, as a student and as a boy who was an ADHD kid and very

typical. But he realized that this wasn't a - that this wasn't a negative. It was different than

a lot of the other kids, but it wasn't a negative. And . . . there were a lot of different

experiences like that throughout the 27 years that I taught (Interview 1, 02/05/21).

Max described his joy at supporting male students with these sorts of labels and spoke of

the importance of helping them see themselves from a different perspective.

I realized that I could have a huge impact on a kid for positive, academic, social,

emotional, whatever. And for me, it was specifically reluctant boys, or low boys or

disruptive boys, whatever you want to call it, when I could have an experience with them

that was positive. And I could tell that they were going to love learning, were going to

challenge themselves to do better, take pride in their work when they didn't hate school

anymore. That was so deeply rewarding that you can't help but be impacted by that. And

those moments of clarity are kind of rare because school can be a grind. And there can be

weeks when you don't have any of those wonderful moments. But after you get a couple

of those, it really starts to - it becomes so fulfilling and so rewarding that it helps you put

up with the tough stuff. . . I just knew that, wow, that was powerful. And that's what

made me willing to kind of stick it out. I knew it was going to be rough. But I knew I was

making a difference in a kid's life (Interview 4, 02/24/21).

Affirmation of Male Student Identity

Consistent with research in this area, participants recognized how other people viewed

them as father figures, encouragers, and coaches for their male students (Jones, 2007; Mills et al.,

2008; Ponte, 2012; Sevier & Ashcraft, 2009). They willingly took on these roles, even though they did not enter the field expecting to do so. Luke spoke of the importance of his gender for male students in his elementary classrooms. Describing his initial work as an instructional assistant at an alternative elementary school in a large suburban Northwest city, he stated:

> I was the first instructional assistant or aide who was male. And because of that, I was - I became very effective because they were boys. And so I was, I became aware of the fact that I had a place, and I had a purpose in elementary education that was partially dependent on, on my gender, and that this was actually a need. And so that's where that sense of call, I think, really was fostered and nurtured was that there was this initial experience. My first real experience being in an elementary classroom for a year and a half was working with these boys who were alienated, dysfunctional, on the margins of the classroom (Interview 1, 02/05/21).

Max and James also noted they could provide perspective and support to their male students in ways their female colleagues likely could not.

> So I had a boy who did not have a father figure at home. He had, I think two sisters in his house, so it was all females, and he didn't. He didn't really have a male identity. As in, he didn't know that it was okay to be silly [as a male]. He didn't know that as a guy there are things you can do, and can't do. So, I felt like as a male teacher, he got a different perspective on school. He had a male that valued what he valued. His interests were validated. But also I felt like as a guy, as a father figure, I could also impart some knowledge onto him. Nothing major, but just that, you know, if some, some values like if you tell somebody you're going to do something, you need to do it. And then that stuff that's good for all students, you know, just some good social skills and good basic values,

but for him, it really made an impact because it validated him as a boy. And I'm not

saying that he couldn't have gotten those values from female teachers and I'm not saying

that his other female teachers dropped the ball or anything like that. I'm not saying that at

all. But I felt like I had an impact on him as a student and as a male (Interview 2,

01/27/21).

James described a similar experience that was not particular to one student, but a pattern

he noticed over his male students in general.

And I think there are some of the boys that I've had that have come through that have

always perceived, like being kind as a weakness. And that if you're nice, that that's a sign

of weakness with other people. And I think that there's still some that leave, probably

having that same view. But I think most of them don't look at it as a weakness. It's

respect, you know, being kind to somebody showing them respect and compassion and

understanding. And we don't always have to push our thoughts and our agendas, and we

don't always have to be so tough in front of everybody. Um, that's often a big obstacle for

a lot of our boys, although not all of them (Interview 2, 02/23/21).

As participants grew in their understanding of how their presence in the elementary

school could be affirming to male students, they wanted to make a positive impact in their larger

school environments. Luke keenly identified this impact as an important influence on his

longevity: "I think that one of the major components of desire that I had to stick it out no matter

what was the effect that I saw that I was having with the boys."

Impact on Female Students

While sensing their biggest impact was for male students, participants did not ignore

female students. In particular, Luke noted this:

And I know that I focused on that I felt like one of my big callings was to be there for the boys. But I also found that it was also important that there were a lot of girls that didn't have dads, or didn't have the type of relationship with a father figure that would have been helpful for them. And to be affirmed, in that I would pay attention to them and help them and show a compassionate, balanced side, where I could really be an understanding person (Interview 1, 02/05/21).

James reflected on his priority for female students: "unfortunately, society isn't going to necessarily treat you as fairly as you should be dealt with. And it's because you're a female. And you don't deserve to be treated that way. And so I don't ever want you to be treated that way." In a similar vein, he continued:

I always tell them [the girls], don't ever take any guff from any guy, you don't need to do that. You stand up for what's right, and you be you and you be confident, and don't worry about the others. . . you have to be happy with you, you have to be proud of you. Since at the end of the day, when you look in the mirror, you are the person you're going to see from now until the end. All these other people, they're not going to be there all the time. So you have to be strong for you (Interview 2, 02/23/21).

Participants received feedback about being role models; David relayed several situations where mothers had communicated their gratitude for his role as a consistent adult male in the lives of their daughters:

But for those students who don't have a lot of stable adults in their lives or households where the parents have to work all the time, you know, they get home and the parents have nothing left to give to them. So I think about not being just an adult in general, but a male, means just being able to be that influence on the kids and the families, whenever

they need it, and especially for the ones that don't have a male role model (Interview 3, 02/22/21).

Luke confirmed this by indicating, "what I encountered was that there were a lot of girls that actually were looking forward to - 'I finally get to have a man teacher, or as they put it, get to have a 'boy' teacher'." He explained how many of his former female students had good relationships with dads and other male adults in their lives, but believed they benefited from his male perspective.

And so I think that there was actually probably a lot of similarity, about how they [girls] benefited from my being in my classroom, but coming from a different, you know, just from a slightly different angle. You know, working with the boys there would be more of a sense of that I would be kind of like more of a role model for them, or, so they can have that direct experience, probably for the girls, it was more of a sense like, oh, here's a kind, compassionate, funny man who doesn't scare me, or who doesn't, you know, who isn't, you know, disconnected, but really cares and actually will talk to me (Interview 2, 02/26/21).

Overall, participants recognized and enjoyed fulfilling their unique roles as teachers, noting their presence provided alternative perspectives for students who might have experienced stereotype threat. These teachers offered a different and helpful perspective for students who had previously struggled to thrive in school.

Misunderstood Students

Participants also felt gratified to support students who were misunderstood or mislabeled in previous school experiences. In some cases, students did not have a good fit with previous

teachers. In others, students had difficulty finding success in a system that "wasn't built for them" as Luke put it. James commented:

> I think that's a big part of where those issues that our students are seeing are coming from. They want to know that somebody's noticing them. Those are the kids that I tend to gravitate toward. A kid who is like the troublemaker (Interview 1, 02/10/21).

Max offered, "I have a special place in my heart for low students . . . And that was a big motivating factor. It was for the kids who were behind. And, uh, I don't know that kind of shaped my teaching philosophy." He was drawn to students with unique learning or social needs, reflecting on his relationships with students as spaces in which he could encourage growth:

> I feel like every kid is a puzzle. Some kids are an easy puzzle to figure out and you can make an impact day one. And some kids are a very, very challenging puzzle. And it's that challenge that I enjoy, even though it's such a struggle sometimes. But it's that challenge. Because when you do have a success, when you have that moment, it's so much more valuable than you know, the perfect kid who does everything right the first time and listens and is polite. I mean, I love that. [chuckles] But the reward is that tough kid. In some years, it's not a big success. Or you might have only halfway solved the puzzle. But if you make progress, that's probably the most important thing I would say is why I keep teaching (Interview 4, 02/24/21).

Luke recounted multiple stories of his impact on students by being a "different kind of male" presence in the community. He was frequently students' first male teacher, and he struck a different tone than other male figures in their lives. He described his efforts with one student:

> I thought, what can I do to keep him positive, to just keep him hoping, keep him feeling like he's a valuable human being . . . so I really focused on his drawings. I encouraged

him . . . and yes, I realized at the end of the school year he did not make the progress that

we wanted him to. He didn't pass his state tests. And yet, I had somehow communicated,

a sense of self-worth to him, that he was a valuable human being. And I remember that

the next year, I got an email from a sixth-grade core teacher saying I can't do anything

with his kid. What did you do because his mom says that he worked wonderfully with

you? And what was so interesting about that was like, that's because I kind of put the idea

of his academic progress in such a way off to the side, because there was something more

foundational, something more basic that he needed to work on. You know, to be

validated, to have his teacher just care for him, be compassionate and encourage him at

least in this one area that he was very passionate about. And to validate that, as like, ok,

that's what you're good at (Interview 3, 03/08/21).

Through these stories and many others, participants described the ways in which they

found meaning in their work as classroom teachers by providing an alternate approach to "doing

school" for students who traditionally struggled. They actively worked to counter the "bad kid"

stereotypes, and affirm students' assets.

Importance of Male Perspective in Elementary Schools

Participants sought a balanced perspective and approach to teaching and learning across

genders. The importance of their perception and experience would ultimately influence each of

the participants in considering their journey and impact as a male elementary classroom teacher.

Luke emphasized this by saying,

Even the girls need to have that experience of having positive, compassionate, strong

male role models in their life from kindergarten onwards. It's extremely rare to find a

kindergarten male teacher. I think they have been out there, but it's extremely rare. And

you know what if, I mean, what if one out of every two kindergarten teachers were guys?

It could revolutionize how boys grow up, but it could also revolutionize how girls grow

up (Interview 3, 03/08/21).

Max felt something similar, saying: "a good mix [of genders] benefits everybody,

the staff, the administration, especially the students going from, you know, maybe a

female teacher to a male teacher, female, you know, getting a mix of both perspectives."

David discussed how he has consistently benefited from a difference in perspective and

approach. He believed what male and female teachers bring balanced out the other, offering the

potential for positive team relationships and support for all students:

> [it's important to have] that balance to help support the student's needs in whatever it
>
> might be I feel very comfortable with. . .it doesn't hurt my feelings when they go out to
>
> the female teacher across the hall - it just doesn't - we just know it's what is good for the
>
> kid (Interview 2, 02/08/21).

Presence of Male Educators in the Family

Three of the four participants noted they relied on other male family members involved in

education. David's mother and father worked at the high school, while Max and James grew up

with multiple male educators in the family. They described the importance of having a male

perspective to turn to, especially at the start of their teaching journey or during a challenging

situation. Max recalled:

> I know it was important. I don't think I realized at the time how important it was, but
>
> being able to bounce ideas off my father, who was a teacher, granted, his experience in
>
> teaching was a long time before me and the environment and the theory and the
>
> philosophies and everything were way different. But being able to talk with him about

what I was experiencing, and getting his input on everything, not just classroom management, or curriculum or whatever, but hearing some previous successes and struggles from another guy teacher was important (Interview 4, 02/24/21).

Both Max and James had multiple male educators in the family. James' grandfather and father both carried out education roles, as did Max's. They each reflected on this influence over their longevity in slightly different ways.

I was thinking about my grandfather and my parents who were both teachers and I think a lot of the reason that I have had success [as a long-term male elementary teacher] was because of how I was raised. The very gentle, caring, empathetic, sympathetic, nurturing environment that I had, which goes hand in hand with good teaching, I think. And I know that's not unique to me. But I think being a good teacher you have to have those characteristics. I don't know, I thought maybe, it's maybe a little more rare in guys? (Interview 3, 02/03/21).

James was similarly supported and inspired by the male educators in his family. He recalls his grandfather, who worked as a principal and a superintendent, conducting home visits, introducing himself, and making space for a relationship with each family in his care. He also recounted multiple phone calls and visits with his father, a long-term middle and high school teacher. He credited his grandmother with providing encouragement, particularly in times of strife or doubt:

And I questioned my ability to be effective, I think at a point. And I talked to my grandmother. And I said, so you know I just don't know if I'm reaching them - if I'm doing a good job. And she said, did you reach one? One? I sure hope so. I'm sure I reached one. Then you did the job today. And I think hearing that word from somebody I

respected so much - to have that permission to be in recognition of those days that were just like, oh my gosh that was a terrible day, but probably it wasn't as bad as I really thought it was (Interview 3, 03/02/21).

For Luke, family was an influence on his work as a male elementary classroom teacher, although he did not have male educators in the family. Instead, he was deeply influenced by being raised with seven other male siblings and becoming a father, particularly a father of two daughters. Parenting his daughters allowed him to better understand "how to work with the girls." He also spoke to the impact of being the second oldest of eight brothers on his vocation:

So all that time that I was growing up, I was internalizing, and developing a psyche or a way of perceiving and working in the world, which became very innate, became intrinsic and, which many male teachers don't have. I mean there's not a lot of teachers out there, men teachers that can go back and say yeah I had six or seven younger brothers. You know I was it, that's just not going to be true so something else has to be the thing that helped them kind of become intrinsically or motivated to want to teach younger children (Interview 3, 03/08/21).

Opportunities to Work with Other Male Elementary Classroom Teachers

Each of the participants encountered people who provided guidance, scaffolding, and emotional support during their careers. Max and James had other men who came alongside:

Mr. Schumann and Mr. Welsh (both pseudonyms) both backed me, and they both had their different way of backing me, and being a young white male in this community was tough at first, you know, like, Who are you, kind of a thing - so it was a different sort of a situation there than here. So I had to, I had to earn my stripes there as well (Interview 1, 02/10/21).

David and Luke derived support from their female colleagues, with whom they developed deep and lasting professional relationships. David described this in pragmatic terms: "the only time I had a fellow male on my team was when I first started teaching sixth grade . . . that was the only time I had a male on my team since then, that I can remember." Despite having taught for 32 years at the elementary level in multiple schools and grades, David could recall only one other moment when there was another male on his grade-level team.

While David's experiences are extreme, the other three participants also commented on the different ways in which they were "the lone male" in terms of grade-level teaching. Luke indicated, "I think it would have been really difficult if I had nobody else. If I was the - truly the only guy teaching in the school, it would have been even more difficult." James was the only male classroom teacher for most of his teaching experience. While there were other males on staff, the presence of another male classroom teacher was rare.

Max was the exception; he had the career-transforming experience of working with a male co-teacher in the tenth year of his career. Max spoke passionately and at length about the importance of "seeing other males do use their own teaching styles and their strengths and their preferences." He reflected:

> When I was very young, it didn't occur to me to do something different, because I felt like I had to do what they told me to do. And I think that's pretty typical for all early teachers, and that's good because that's how I learned a lot of different things. But with experience, and I think exposure to other guys, I learned that it's flexible, you can input your own personality into your teaching, and that's a good thing (Interview 2, 01/27/21).

While he celebrated and affirmed the positive relationships and work his female colleagues did, he noted their perspective on issues was simply "different." He valued the

opportunity to work alongside other males, which gave Max "confidence to kind of try out my own stuff instead of just doing what all the other female teachers were doing or what all the female professional development trainers had told me to do." The impact of this experience on Max's longevity in the classroom was obvious: "seeing other male teachers with the same kind of idea, with the same kind of philosophy, teaching style? Yeah, that's validating." At one point Max wondered aloud:

> If I would have had more experiences with male teachers, earlier in my career, I might have come to my conclusions sooner. But I didn't, it wasn't until much later and just experience and trial and error until I figured out what, what I value to get enough confidence to, to, to teach with confidence. But maybe if I was younger? I don't know. I don't know. But if I would have had some positive male role models or some experiences with other male teachers, that might have helped me clarify what's important to me sooner (Interview 4, 02/24/21).

Confidence in their Male Perspective and Approach

All participants articulated confidence in their identity as a teacher, although it was differently sourced for each of them. James found it in previous educators, male colleagues, and male family members who simply encouraged him to be himself. He also recounted a situation in which he received feedback and direct support from a male colleague during a school sporting event:

> He's like, why are you so quiet out there making those calls here? You hardly hear the whistle, blah, blah, blah. I said, well, I'm afraid that I'm going to make a mistake. And he said, if you're going to blow it, blow it big. Which can be taken as two ways. Like if you're going to blow your whistle, blow it big, or if you're going to blow it as a mistake,

blow it big, whatever. Yeah, own it. Just do it. Just go and try it . . .So, yeah, he gave

lessons that I carry with me (Interview 2, 02/23/21).

Max, too, eventually found his confidence after his experiences working with males and

increasing his recognition of the powerful and impactful things occurring in his classroom:

I have confidence. I have a huge amount of knowledge, strategies, I feel very, I feel like I

can do a really good job at teaching in the classroom. I don't stress too much because I

know what works and I know what I like doing. I know how to meet the needs of each

kid. No matter where they're at, just from my experience as a male elementary teacher

(Interview 3, 01/27/21).

This confidence developed over time and through support from male and female

colleagues. Luke recalled several situations where he could identify how his approach with

children made a difference. In the beginning, he often had to dig deep to find the confidence to

remain in the classroom:

I had to really tell myself. This is something I have to desire. I have to yearn for it and

then I have to work . . . So as the years went on, it became easier and easier. You know,

being able to teach and to have the kids respond to me in really positive ways (Interview

1, 02/05/21).

Luke recognized part of his confidence came from his belief in his work as a vocation, as

a specific calling based on his life experiences, opportunities, and perspectives.

Because if, if we as white males bail out just because it feels a little bit awkward. Um,

that's pretty lame. And so it was, it was like that realization, was one of the things that

just kept me going was like, yes you're going to feel a little bit awkward, but this is where

you push through those boundaries (Interview 2, 02/26/21).

David identified the need to "adapt" and learn how to engage in a system that initially "dumped on him" when creating his first class list. He recalled, "if I had been a first-year teacher, I would have quit." Thankfully, David had already experienced teaching prior to this experience and was able to gain confidence in the second year in the district. This enabled him to stay in the classroom, rather than pushing him into a different career.

> I'm not that perseverant. I don't quit easily but I'm not, I'm not one of those persons that could - I can't, I don't have the personality to stay out of my comfort zone, beyond my comfort zone . . . I don't know for sure, but I would have quit. Maybe I wouldn't have quit teaching . . . but I would have had to take a break (Interview 1, 02/01/21).

In speaking about his confidence to be his true self in the classroom, Max stated:

> I feel like the male perspective that I bring to the classroom is valuable. I feel like kids are going to, especially in elementary school, kids are going to have mostly female teachers, and having a male teacher is going to benefit them just from the experience, from the difference in teaching styles, from personality, from just the way I do things, so I see the value in that (Interview 2, 01/27/21).

Taken together, the themes identified across participants' experience offer several insights into what sustains male educators in a female-dominated educational system. In this final third of the chapter, I offer assertions from the data which further clarify what mattered to these participants as they persevered in the elementary classroom.

Assertions

Participants' determination to remain in the classroom was nourished by relationships with colleagues, families, and students, which they argued was likely not a significantly different

experience from their female colleagues. The following assertions and associated discussion offer further insight across the data corpus on why this research is important.

- Assertion 1: During their career, participants reported having a supportive and encouraging relationship with at least one colleague who respected their perspectives and approach to teaching and learning.

- Assertion 2: Student and family relationships kept the work fulfilling.

- Assertion 3: All participants identified their relationships with students and families as sustaining them in their careers, regardless of either support or criticism from their colleagues.

- Assertion 4: In their journey to identifying as long-term classroom teachers, participants believed their ability to make a positive difference outweighed whatever challenges they encountered.

Assertion 1: During their career, participants reported having a supportive and encouraging relationship with at least one colleague who respected their perspectives and approach to teaching and learning.

All participants discussed the importance of relationships within their journeys. While the nature of the relationships varied, faculty relationships seemed the most supportive in helping them sustain their elementary careers. Each of them identified a significant co-teacher who provided support and affirmation for their perspectives. Max identified his male co-teacher relationships as most impactful:

Before I had discovered my teaching style and felt comfortable teaching the way that I wanted to. I was always learning and always copying and doing what I was told. Because everybody was more experienced than me. Everybody had more knowledge and the latest

and greatest philosophies and strategies and everything so I was just soaking up information, which was great because I needed to learn. But once I started working with males and saw their styles, I was able to, kind of, I don't know, crystallize or, you know, get the essence of who I was as a teacher, what I valued, what was important to me. Who, who I wanted to be, as a teacher, what I valued, and seeing other guys doing similar things really made me realize, Oh, I don't have to be like that teacher, or I don't have to do my classroom management like that teacher, I've got experience...I've tried lots of different strategies and philosophies, and then I could finally start to figure out exactly who I was as a teacher, and how I wanted to teach, and that kind of support or that kind of experience or exposure helped me decide that I could make choices on my own, based on what I thought was best for me and my students and I didn't have to do everything like somebody else. That really helped and gave me a lot of confidence when I realized, Hey, I can cut up and make jokes in class. I can be silly. I can talk about Star Wars and rock and roll because that's who I am and that's part of the grade school experience. The kids get exposed to lots of different kinds of teachers. It's okay for me to be who I want to be as a teacher (Interview 2, 01/27/21).

James recounted specific situations in which the direct communication style of a male teacher colleague helped him to adjust his teaching.

But I needed Pat's (a pseudonym) guidance on that [teaching situation] because I wasn't thinking of it that way at all. And so having some other eyes is really, really helpful. And he wasn't judgey about it at all. It was, and that was probably one of the reasons that I was able to accept that advice more readily (Interview 2, 02/23/21).

David and Luke developed their most supportive relationships within small teams, generally with one other female teacher. Despite this commonality, David and Luke had very different ways of explaining the significance of this relationship for their resilience in the field. David identified a need for "some of the emotional support that women give that guys don't give in general."

He went on to describe the impact of a deep, ongoing, collegial relationship with a female co-teacher as one where:

> She was very supportive and needy at the same time so we used each other for [mutual] benefit - because she was supporting, but yet she needed support - she would become one of my best friends, still is one of the best friends to this day, but she retired, four or five years ago . . . we had a very strong friendship and colleague-ship (Interview 2, 02/08/21).

Luke worked for many years with just one other female teacher who had a similar, faith-based perspective to his:

> She was a co-teacher, not in the same class, but rather she was the other fifth-grade teacher, and we would get together upon occasion, and she would just want to see, try to figure out my perspective as a male teacher on what was happening with some of the boys in her classroom. And what I really liked about working with that teacher was that I was able to kind of help (Interview 1, 02/05/21).

Luke acknowledged the uniqueness of this relationship was likely due to only two teachers being on the team; they were "thus equals." He described the support and growth he experienced from the relationship:

So there was this balance of two teachers. And I didn't feel at that point that the

difference between [us] or that the communication was that difficult because I was only

working with one other person so there was a sense of needing to put aside any gender-

specific type of ways of communicating. You put that aside because that was the only

person, else in your grade level, that that you could talk to. So she needed to talk with me

the same amount that I needed to talk with her, you know and communicate. After that,

after she retired, and we moved over, and we had other teachers and there was almost

always three fifth grade teachers, and I would be the odd man out [laughing] (Interview

1, 02/05/21).

Assertion 2: Student and family relationships kept the work fulfilling.

In terms of student relationships, participants sensed their relationships with families in

their school communities enabled them to create effective learning environments and find deep

enjoyment in their careers. Luke put it this way:

I think that [relationships] was probably one of the things that kept me going in the

profession. The other thing, too, was that I had such a positive experience and

relationships with a lot of the students that I had that they would come back and visit me

after they had gotten into middle school. And I sometimes I'd give him come back and

visit when they were in high school, which let me know that it worked out that whatever I

had done while they were in my classroom, had been very essential, very positive in their

educational career. And it was because I was a compassionate, active male in their lives

(Interview 1, 02/05/21).

Max discussed how the influence of Fay & Funk's (1995) *Love and Logic* model allowed

him to persevere because he stopped focusing on teaching elements that were less enjoyable or

fulfilling. Once he "knew what was important, that was freeing." He identified this as important not only in his previous teaching experience but his current situation with COVID-19. He was able to counteract the difficulties of the past year and awkward teaching situations because he cultivated strong relationships with students:

> But my identity as a teacher for like the first 10 years of teaching - I didn't have those core values. I didn't have those mantras or the values that I know are important. And the reason that I'm teaching. Now I have relationships: number one relationships. I've learned that kids - you can make or break kids just by the atmosphere in your classroom. When kids know that you care about them, they will strive to please you to work hard. You can even get them, you can challenge them and get them to try stuff and do stuff that they normally wouldn't. If they like you. So building that relationship is day one for me now (Interview 3, 02/03/21).

> Luke also named Fay & Funk's (1995) work as a helpful influence on his perspective:

> One of the best philosophies out there for me was *Love and Logic*, where you know you just kind of say like, if, if somebody is misbehaving or whatever instead of getting this power struggle with them. You go, with compassion . . . I would say that [forging student relationships] would be the chief underlying factor that kept me in the profession, but also was the most effective way to be a teacher (Interview 3, 03/08/21).

Relationships enabled James to be authentic with students, contributing to increased job satisfaction in his elementary classroom role. He stated, "that's the thing about relationships, it's not just a one and done. Not if you want something that's realistic and grows and produces, right? It takes time and vulnerability and failure." He recognized the impact of learning to apologize to his students, which led to fulfillment and joy in his work and in his relationships with students.

And then, when Jim (a pseudonym) came in, I apologized to him in front of everybody...
My reaction to you, doing that wasn't okay either. And I owe you an apology. And that
was not the way that I should have handled that. After that, I never had a problem with
Jim again until the last day of school (Interview 1, 02/10/21).

Luke emphasized numerous points in his career when a focus on relationships with
students and their families allowed him to prioritize his educational choices and find fulfillment
in his ongoing collaboration with students and families:

I just, and I think that that's what kept me going was - and like I've said before, I really
enjoyed the relationships that I had with a lot of these children throughout the years. And
that I got as - many years, I got as much energy from them, as I put out towards them
(Interview 3, 03/08/21).

Ultimately, all four participants seemed to agree with James's words: "relationships are
important in this business. You can't - you're not going to be successful without it."

**Assertion 3: All participants identified their relationships with students and families as
sustaining them in their careers, regardless of either support or criticism from their
colleagues.**

The notion of affirmation appeared in our conversations about job satisfaction and why
males elect to remain in the elementary classroom despite various challenges. Just as some of the
issues are specific to gender and other issues are simply a part of the profession, they rationalized
their decision to stay based on gender or their perceived impact as teachers. James recognized he
had a choice about whose approval to seek. He learned to minimize what he received from
administrators or co-teachers in favor of what students said. As soon as he was able to recognize
his work was about students more than it was about any of the other adults in the building, as he

put it, "all that other stuff didn't matter." He was able to live with the reality of being paired with all-female teachers with very different perspectives, or of being misunderstood because student growth affirmed his good work. Luke recognized how his role in the school community allowed him to "embrace it...realizing that these things then were going to be able to give me the strength to overcome the awkwardness or feelings of isolation."

On the whole, participants indicated they rarely received affirmations from their colleagues or administrators; these came from students and families. James reflected on this as where he needed to place his focus as a male elementary classroom teacher:

I think too often, yeah, at the beginning, you know, we're worried about what the administration is going to say. What are we going to do now, my scores are tanking, you know? Shift that focus - shift that focus. The other stuff will come when you do (Interview 3, 03/02/21).

For David, being a male elementary teacher meant service, relationship, and professionalism. His community's support sustained him, even when colleagues, administrators, or other adults did not.

The work of an elementary school teacher gets "easier" with time because teachers develop a "pot of gold," as James said, filled with affirmations from previous students and families, to draw from on the days when the work is harder. He enthusiastically noted:

I think that's one of the beautiful things about being in this so long is the opportunity to hear successes, from students that you've had in the past and to recognize the things that you said are as powerful as they are (Interview 1, 02/10/21).

Luke said families' affirmations, "just kept pushing me forward into greater depth. And then, you know, it became easier just to keep moving forward." In a later interview, he reflected,

"as I got older, I had proof from my kids' test scores. . . my kids always did as well or better than any of the other kids. And it was like, I knew that whatever I was doing was solid."

In describing a recent interaction with a previous student, Max considered the ways in which the affirmations from a student from over a decade ago continue to encourage his work. "I think every teacher kind of feels that way when you . . . see years later the impact that you had on kids. That's fulfilling. That's what keeps you going because the day-to-day grind is hard."

Assertion 4: In their journey to identifying as long-term classroom teachers, participants believed their ability to make a positive difference outweighed whatever challenges they encountered.

All four male candidates indicated the source of their longevity was their ability to recognize the ways they positively influenced children's lives. James reflected, "I've enjoyed it [classroom teaching]. I enjoy what I do. Otherwise, who would keep doing it? So, I find value in it for sure. There are a lot of - many moments of just being proud of the kids and what I see."

Participants seemed united in their belief about the "good" of teaching (their impact on schools, supporting "challenging" male students, and their positive role-modeling) far outweighed the challenges of serving as a male elementary classroom teacher. David indicated he could put up with all the difficulties, changes, and adaptations required of him because he truly loved the work and the students. James noted, "it's not always hard, because it's, there's so much joy that I get from it that even the hard stuff doesn't seem hard, you know."

Luke and James recognized they were able to stay the course because of this impact on students. As Luke put it,

> And so some of that you have to overcome and just realize well, not everything that
> society tells you as your role is going to be helpful. . . I think that sometimes some men

are - feel pressured societally, to be in certain professions, you know, where they come

across as being strong or tough or super active. . . and so I was entering this field that

society is kind of like, well, isn't that what women are supposed to do?' And so that was

something that I had to come to terms with by just saying in my own mind, nope! That

actually what society actually needs is probably about a 50:50 ratio, you know? And if

the other men aren't stepping up to it, I'm going to step up to it (Interview 3, 03/08/21).

Max named several key realizations and inspiring moments in his teaching work:

My job is to provide for them what they need. So, every kid is different. And that's the

challenge I think that's the fascinating problem solving that I like - is getting to know the

kid, and then figuring out what they need to be successful. . . each kid's a puzzle that I've

got to figure out. That might be the most important thing to me as a teacher (Interview 3,

02/03/21).

Although gender did not impact all of Max's relationships in the school community, he

recognized how he brought insight his female colleagues could not: "I feel like I bring something

to class that not all other teachers do. And that kind of impact will hopefully build a foundation

for all my students."

Conclusion

This chapter explored the essential themes that arose as a result of listening to and

analyzing the stories of four male long-term teachers to better understand the identity-formation

process and sustaining influences for their career as elementary educators. In the next chapter, I

outline the significance of this phenomenological study and discuss how these findings ought to

shape future practice and policy to promote longevity for male elementary teachers.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of long-term male elementary teachers to better understand: (a) what helped them navigate their teacher identity (b) significant experiences on their journey, and (c) key influences in their sustainability. This chapter summarizes participants' individual experiences, common themes across them, and discusses the significance of the study's findings. This chapter also includes a reflection on the implications and limitations of the study, as well as areas of potential future research on the topic.

As we turn towards the findings and implications in this study, it is important to recognize that within the context of the literature (Lovett, 2014; Oyler et al., 2001; Palmer et al., 2020) and the participants in this study, there is a struggle to articulate what it means to have a 'male' perspective as an elementary teacher as well as what the differences might be between male and female elementary teachers. Participants in this study confirmed that the nuance of "maleness" in perspective or pedagogy can be difficult to isolate or describe, in congruence with research literature (Haase, 2010; Hedlin et al., 2019; Sargent, 2000; Skelton, 2012). Sumsion (2000) called this "otherness" while Haase (2010) named this as "masculine performance" (p. 174). Participants dealt with this in various ways throughout our conversations, using phrases like "difference, awkwardness, or adapt to a system not built for me" in describing their approaches to elementary education.

Summary of Findings

The driving influences behind what keeps long-term male teachers in the elementary classroom are vast and complex, but core to each participant's story was a deep belief in the impact of their work as elementary classroom teachers, which eclipsed the challenges they faced

throughout their careers. From the lived experiences and stories of these participants, four

assertions became apparent:

- Assertion 1: During their career, participants reported having a supportive and
  encouraging relationship with at least one colleague who respected their
  perspectives and approach to teaching and learning.

- Assertion 2: Student and family relationships kept the work fulfilling.

- Assertion 3: All participants identified their relationships with students and
  families as sustaining them in their careers, regardless of either support or
  criticism from their colleagues.

- Assertion 4: In their journey to identifying as long-term classroom teachers,
  participants believed their ability to make a positive difference outweighed
  whatever challenges they encountered.

Although participants worked in a variety of school districts and had unique experiences,

there were common threads. The following research questions and their answers compel the field

to consider what participants' stories reveal about how best to support male elementary

classroom teachers.

What scaffolds on the journey helped long-term male elementary teachers navigate their

identity as a teacher?

While their experiences and discussion of the issue varied, each of the long-term male

elementary classroom teachers in this study needed time to grow into their identity as a teacher.

While this is common for all elementary educators, as males, participants in this study had to

navigate when to stand up for their teaching priorities and when to "not make waves." This work

to know when to draw attention to themselves for having a different opinion or perspective on

large and small matters within the school community took energy. In short, they had to find ways of existing inside of an educational system not "built for them" with no formal scaffolds to help them build confidence to stay at the elementary level.

As they reflected on their careers, they articulated how they developed the confidence to "be themselves" in different ways. Max developed it when he worked alongside an additional male teacher at his grade level. James came to recognize even one student well-served meant he was "doing his job." For David and Luke, this confidence grew out an ability to dig deep into their sense of a calling to serve in their communities. Each one developed their own scaffolds to be successful in their careers and step fully into their identity as an elementary teacher. It is striking that none of them found these supports within their districts or formal programs. They had to seek and develop them on their own. This compels questions of how school systems might better understand what males need to be successful and sustained in the elementary classroom. School districts might purposefully pair new teachers with mentors who can actively affirm their perspectives and help mitigate the "odd man out" phenomenon in female-dominated workplaces. Districts would do well to develop a more conscientious workplace that has an emphasis on developing and supporting male perspectives.

What key moments or influences in long-term male elementary school teachers' experiences led them to remain teaching in the classroom?

The most influential moments shaping participants' willingness to stay seemed to be relational. Each participant recounted their work to find and recognize the affirmations which kept their work meaningful and worthwhile, keeping the scale "tipped" towards remaining in the classroom. This echoes the work of Jones (2016) who noted the "reward of witnessing the impact

they had upon the lives of children and families" (p. 419) as part of male teachers' inspiration for working with young children.

This study highlighted how challenging it can be for male teachers to overcome the "awkwardness" of navigating gender differences and politics (Hsiao-Jung, 2016), confirming Jones's (2007) observation, "for many male teachers . . . their initial years within the primary school can be fraught with uncertainty and discomfort" (p. 191). Yet participants in this study agreed their fulfillment of serving students and families outweighed their feelings of difference and isolation they experienced. They actively reminded themselves of the good with tools such as James's "smile file," which he drew upon in both challenging and celebratory moments of his career. But it takes time to develop a bank of resources to lean upon when scrutiny or suspicion feels like too much to bear.

This study also offers insight into how these teachers needed and received affirmation about the worth of their work. Most importantly, they identified the source of this encouragement as families and students, rather than administrators or colleagues. This is a noteworthy contribution to what is presently known about how male elementary teachers experience their work; none of the research reviewed for this study indicated this as an area of note for researchers.

Implications of the Research

Given its small size, both in the number of participants and geographic location, the results of this study cannot and should not be generalized to the experience of all long-term elementary male classroom teachers. This study can, however, provide additional ideas and questions for the future of long-term male elementary teachers, especially for those districts and

states hoping to better understand the perceptions, experiences, and affirmations of male educators, whether to increase recruitment or retention within their school communities.

This study addressed a gap in the literature on long-term male elementary classroom teachers and how they describe their experiences after remaining in the classroom for an entire career. It contributes and adds to the current knowledge base by providing new insights into the male elementary educator experience with a focus on the positive scaffolds and experiences which occurred in the careers of long-term male elementary educators.

Mistry and Sood's (2016) study focused on the need for a gender-balanced workforce attentive to common issues of concern for both genders. Their work connects to this study because the creation of workspaces that honor the male perspective on teaching and learning is far more complex than simply increasing the number of male elementary classroom teachers (Coulter & McNay, 1993; Skelton, 2013). This study has encouraged research in this area to expand to consider the positive stories and experiences of males in elementary education, rather than focus on the "problem" of the shortage of males in the field. A focus on positive stories from the field can serve as a starting point for revising institutional practices and educational policies to not only affirm but attract males into the elementary classroom.

Implications for Educational Practice and Policy

Sanatullova-Allison (2010) queried, "if men entering the field of elementary education are motivated more and more from within, what implications does this have on the present and future recruitment, training, and retention of male elementary school teachers?" (p. 39). This study indicates the ongoing relevance of this question, particularly in light of how critical internal motivation and core values were to the teachers in this study who found relationships

with students a critical component in their resilience to stay. There are thus several implications for educational practice that could benefit male elementary teachers based on this study.

If the field wishes to recruit and retain male elementary teachers, universities ought to invest in recruiting efforts. In some situations, the recruitment of male teacher candidates could be as simple as pointing out elementary education to males as a viable option as a program of study. Cunningham and Watson (2002) note, however, it is important to consider "critical mass" when it comes to the recruitment of males in elementary education, in order to avoid the potential awkwardness and isolation of being a solitary male in a program or on an elementary school campus.

Preservice teacher education programs must cultivate awareness of male teacher candidates' perspectives on education (Oyler et al., 2001), needs for gender-specific training, and enact pedagogical changes to ensure an accessible and effective program for male teacher candidates. Teacher education programs could also conduct ongoing surveys with male elementary classroom teacher graduates to determine what practices or policies they find helpful during their program, student teaching, and first-year experiences (Cunningham & Watson, 2002).

Given the field's lack of understanding about male elementary teachers' experience (Ponte, 2012, Sumsion, 2000), school district and university programs should collaborate to ensure male teachers benefit from collegial relationships with other male teachers (Cooney & Bittner, 2001; Mills et al., 2008). Districts ought to consider how to connect potential "lone males," as many of the participants in this study described themselves. Systematic efforts by administrators and districts to communicate the unique, added values and perspectives males bring to the elementary classroom could contribute to their retention.

Suggestions for Future Research

Further research focused on positive experiences or meaningful, career-changing moments could add to the field's knowledge about how to keep males active and engaged in the elementary classroom. A variety of studies, including an exploration of current versus previous support structures and scaffolds for male elementary teachers or moments where male elementary educators almost left the field but chose to stay, could provide additional insights and perspectives on how male elementary teachers navigate their identity as a teacher and persevere. Palmer et al. (2020) also recognized the need for additional research to explore the experience of being a male elementary teacher in order to recruit and retain male teachers.

There is also a need for deeper understanding of assertion two, namely, that all four males in this study identified student and family affirmations as a sustaining and contributing factor to their longevity. This correlates with Jones's (2016) findings about males working in Early Childhood environments; 22 of the 31 participants "commented on the reward of witnessing the impact they had on children and families" (p. 419). Given that male classroom teachers are generally underrepresented at the elementary level, it is important for future research to better understand the phenomenon of student and family affirmation for male elementary classroom teachers and how this might impact their longevity in the field.

Studies considering the experiences of long-term male elementary classroom teachers by race, ethnicity, school size, structure, or district location would also allow for a more focused and nuanced understanding of how any of these potential characteristics may or may not influence the experiences and scaffolds encountered by male elementary teachers throughout their careers. Additional questions could also be answered in these studies, such as the specific affirmations and support systems that keep male elementary educators of color returning to the classroom or

the impact of large versus small school districts on the retention of males in the elementary classroom.

In addition to these qualitative studies, it could also be helpful to consider surveys designed to understand how often male elementary educators seek counsel from male colleagues (or wish they could). This could offer broader perspectives on an issue that stretches farther than the Pacific Northwest or even the United States. Cushman (2005a) found a large percentage of male educators in her Australian study came to teaching from other fields, which suggests there are further questions about why males might choose teaching as a "second" career or later in life.

Limitations

The scope of this study was limited to long-term male elementary classroom teachers with 25 or more years of teaching experience. It did not consider how these male teachers' experiences may be similar or dissimilar to those of other elementary classroom teachers, nor did it include student voices as a means of verifying teachers' impact. I also deliberately did not include male educators in this study who may have started in other roles, such as a Physical Education teacher or ELD teacher, and then shifted into the classroom, which meant I may have inadvertently missed the perspectives of educators who elected to shift their role from a larger school-based role to the more focused and intimate role of the classroom teacher and any potential reasons why this level of relationship with students may or may not contribute to male elementary educator longevity.

While not purposeful, this study also did not include male elementary educators of color or male elementary educators from urban settings. This was simply a result of the recruitment process and not an intentional design element. It does, however, influence the generalizability of

these stories to other long-term male elementary educators' experience, given the lack of diverse voices in the study.

Final Thoughts

I entered into this study unsure of what I might find. Through the three-tiered interview process, I cried, I laughed, I was sobered, I was invited into inside jokes, but mostly, I was awed to witness the sincere authenticity and joy with which participants told their stories. During member checking and opportunities to reflect on the impact of the work they do, participants also experienced a roller coaster of emotions. I have learned more about how male elementary educators provide a unique perspective and learning environment for male and female students. I have grown to better understand and appreciate how their motivations and inspirations to teach reflect their unique approach to the work of elementary education and go far deeper than I originally expected at the outset of this study.

This research process allowed me and the participants to stay focused on the positive aspects of a long-term career as an elementary classroom teacher. Several participants commented that one of their primary reasons for participating in the study was because they had never before been asked to share their stories, much less to consider the positive aspects of their lived experiences. By the end of the study, each one expressed appreciation for the opportunity to reflect on their careers and consider their impact on their communities. This was something I was not expecting, yet watching participants grow in awareness and acceptance of their long-term impact on students, families, and school communities was an inspirational and powerful element of the study. As more long-term male educators are invited to tell their stories, I am hopeful the field will learn to celebrate the unique contributions and perspectives of all

educators, but especially those male elementary classroom teachers who may not be fully awake

to the many ways in which they positively contribute to care and compassion in our society.

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APPENDIX A

Recruitment Email

Hello (name) - I hope that you are well. I am currently completing a Doctorate in Educational Leadership at George Fox University. As a previous elementary school teacher and a faculty member in our teacher licensure programs, I am interested in better understanding the experiences of male teachers who remain in the elementary classroom for 20 or more years.

(name), a colleague in our program, shared your name as someone who might be eligible and interested in this study. I am hopeful that this opportunity to give feedback to the profession and to share your story in a meaningful way might be of interest to you.

I am anticipating conducting interviews with long-term male elementary school teachers during the month of February 2021. You would participate in three 60-minute interviews, via zoom or another digital meeting platform that you are comfortable with. I will use an artificial intelligence transcription program called otter.ai during our meeting times. Each interview session has a distinct purpose and interview questions can be provided to you to review ahead of time, if you prefer.

I have been given permission to conduct this study by the Institutional Review Board of George Fox University. The information gathered in this study will be used to complete my dissertation and will be shared with my chair at George Fox University. All data collected will be confidential. Participant names, locations, and school districts will not be used. I will use pseudonyms for any shared information. Additionally, you will also be allowed to review the transcript from each interview to determine if there is something that you would like to have removed. You also will have the option to review the analysis of the data to ensure that the themes and interpretations align with the experiences and perspectives that you tried to communicate. At any time, you may opt-out of participation in the study.

While you won't be compensated for participating in the study, a small thank-you-gift-card will be provided for your time. I would be grateful to have the opportunity to interview you to learn more about your experience as a male elementary teacher that has worked in the elementary classroom for 20 or more years. A letter of consent with detailed information about the benefits, risks, confidentiality, and uses of this study will be shared with those participants interested in participating in the interview process.

I look forward to working with you if you are interested in sharing your story and experiences. Please respond to this email to indicate whether you are or are not interested in being interviewed for this study. I am also glad to answer any additional clarifying questions you might have about this study.

Sincerely,
Maranda Turner

APPENDIX B

Potential Interview Questions* Organized Based on Seidman's (2019) Three-Tiered Structure

Interview One (life history)	Interview Two (contemporary experiences)	Interview Three (meaning of the experiences)
Can you tell me about your career as a male elementary school teacher?	*What is the hardest/greatest aspect of your work as an elementary school teacher?*	*What were the key moments on your journey that motivated you to keep teaching?*
What interested you in elementary school teaching as a career?	What do you remember about your early experiences as an elementary teacher?	When did you know you were 'where you were supposed to be' (Ponte, 2012) as an elementary school teacher?
Can you describe your support system as you navigated your identity as a teacher?	How do those experiences compare with being 10-15-20 years into your career?	*What does it mean to be a male elementary school teacher?*
What scaffolds (or people) did you have to help you navigate your identity as a teacher throughout your career?	What's your best advice for a young male considering elementary education as a career?	

*Italicized quotes indicate questions that need to be answered, but not necessarily asked, if the participant addresses them through their responses or storytelling.

Clarifying questions to be used throughout the interview series process (Josselson, 2013):

Clarification	Confusion	Generalization	Linkages
I've heard a bit about (topic), but it would help me understand if you would explain its significance for you. Tell me more what you mean when you say . . .	I'm afraid I'm a bit confused here and I want to go over this again to make sure I understand better . . .	How did you experience (topic) in your own life/career/experience?	Can you tell me about how (topic) and (topic) are linked for you? You were talking about (idea) and then began talking about (idea) so I'm wondering how these are connected in your mind.

APPENDIX C

Informed Consent Form

<u>INTRODUCTION</u>
The purposes of this form are to provide you (as a research study participant) information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research and to record your consent to be involved in the study.

<u>RESEARCHER</u>
Maranda Turner, Doctoral Student, George Fox University

<u>STUDY PURPOSE</u>
The purpose of the research is to explore the lived experiences of male elementary school teachers (grades K-6) who have remained teaching in the elementary classroom for 20 or more years.

<u>DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH STUDY</u>
If you decide to participate, you will join an unfunded study. The protocol for this research includes the following commitments and your consent to be recorded in these activities through video or audio recording:
1. To be recorded in three separate interviews through video or audio recording.
2. As a researcher, I will be keeping an electronic Researcher's Notebook. This notebook will be a place where I keep interview transcripts, jot notes, code responses, and keep analytic memos about the themes or assertions in the collected information.
   a. You will have the option of reviewing the information related to your three interviews to ensure the accuracy of the coding and themes discovered. You will also be able to ensure that all information shared in the interview transcript is usable by the researcher. You will be able to strike any information from the interview transcripts that you do not want considered as a part of the research study.

The volume and nature of the data collection necessitates video/audio recording. Your participation in the study connotes agreement to this.

<u>RISKS</u>
There are no known risks from taking part in this study, but in any research, there is some possibility that you may be subject to risks that have not yet been identified. It is important to know that the small nature of this study makes it difficult to guarantee complete confidentiality. It may be possible that others will know what you have reported. Because of this, you will be free to strike data or information from the record, should you feel concerned about any adverse impact to you.

<u>BENEFITS</u>
The possible/main benefit of your participation in the research is the opportunity to reflect on the experiences that you have had throughout your career. Beyond the benefits to you personally, this research has the potential to benefit the educational field through a deeper understanding of the needs and experiences of long-term male elementary teachers and how to better build systems of recruitment and retention in support of males in the elementary classroom.

<u>CONFIDENTIALITY</u>
Due to the nature of this small, qualitative study, the researcher cannot guarantee complete confidentiality of your data. It may be possible that others will know what you have reported. The results of this research study may be used in reports, presentations, and publications, but the researcher will not identify you by

name, unless you so choose. Based on your wishes, Maranda will assign you a pseudonym and use this code in working with and discussing the data. I will also not identify your teaching or residence location or the name of the school districts in which you have worked throughout your career. I will not share any specific, identifiable information gleaned from interviews with any individuals and information will held in a secure location. Only Maranda and her chair, Dr. Karen Buchanan will have access to the interview transcripts and coding log information. All raw data from interviews will be destroyed three years after the completion of this research.

WITHDRAWAL PRIVILEGE
Participation in this study is completely voluntary. It is ok for you to say "no." Even if you consent now, you are free to withdraw consent later, and withdraw from the study at any time. Your decision will not affect your relationship with George Fox University or otherwise cause a loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled. If you choose to withdraw from the study, the researcher will discuss your preferences for any data in which you were a part.

COSTS AND PAYMENTS
There is no payment for your participation in the study.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT
Any questions you have concerning the research study or your participation in the study (before or after your consent), will be answered by Maranda Turner (503-XXX-XXXX).

This form explains the nature, demands, benefits and any risk of the project. By signing this form, you agree knowingly to assume any risks involved. Remember, your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefit. In signing this consent form, you are not waiving any legal claims, rights, or remedies. A copy of this consent form will be given (offered) to you.

Your signature below indicates that you consent to participate in the above study. By signing below, you are granting to the researcher the right to use your recorded interview transcript for presenting or publishing this research.

Participant's Signature_____

Printed Name_____

Date_____

APPENDIX D

IRB Approval

2201139

Title: Perspectives of Long-Term Male Elementary Teachers on Why They Stay in the Classroom

Principal Researcher(s): Maranda Turner

Date application completed: 11/20/20
        (The researcher needs to complete the above information on this page)

COMMITTEE FINDING: | For Committee Use Only |

☒ (1) The proposed research makes adequate provision for safeguarding the health and dignity of the subjects and is therefore approved.

☐ (2) Due to the assessment of risk being questionable or being subject to change, the research must be periodically reviewed by the **HSRC** on a   basis throughout the course of the research or until otherwise notified. This requires resubmission of this form, with updated information, for each periodic review.

☐ (3) The proposed research evidences some unnecessary risk to participants and therefore must be revised to remedy the following specific area(s) on non-compliance:

☐ (4) The proposed research contains serious and potentially damaging risks to subjects and is therefore not approved.

_____   **11-30-20**

Chair or designated member   Date