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# A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Unique Experience of Male Elementary Teachers

Alberta N. Richardson  
*Walden University*

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Alberta Richardson

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Walden University  
2014

Abstract

A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Unique Experience of  
Male Elementary Teachers

by

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Ed.S., Alabama State University, 1992

M.Ed., Alabama State University, 1979

B.A. Spring Hill College, 1972

Doctoral Proposal Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Education

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## Abstract

The percentage of male teachers is at its lowest number in 40 years. The problem is that fewer males are choosing elementary teaching as a career choice. As a result, many elementary students rarely see a male teacher during their formative education years. This issue is a concern for superintendents, college of education deans, recruiters, school administrators, and parents whose children are not being exposed to a diverse teacher workforce that includes male elementary teachers. The purpose of this study was to better define and understand the unique experiences of male elementary teachers in today's classroom. The conceptual framework for the study incorporated Levinson's adult male development theory, Palmer's teaching landscape, and Mezirow's transformative learning theory. This qualitative study investigated the experience of 6 male elementary teachers in 3 different school districts in a southeastern state. This study followed Moustakas's phenomenological method utilizing criterion sampling. Data were collected, analyzed, and coded for preliminary categories and themes. Four themes emerged: (1) male role modeling, (2) readying students, (3) establishing mentoring relationships, and (4) mattering. The findings show that male elementary teachers are a crucial voice for some students, and they fulfill a needed role in the elementary school. This study addresses positive social change by providing a voice for the male elementary teacher, a diminishing but important teaching population, while also illustrating how the male elementary teacher's presence in the classroom can serve as a positive role model, mentor, and diverse elementary learning experience for the children.



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## Dedication

This study is dedicated to my parents, Nathaniel A. & Annie Pearl Richardson, Sr., both of whom began their careers as elementary classroom teachers. Although neither was physically with us when this study began, both strongly encouraged the idea of the educational pursuit which culminated in this study. They remain a very powerful spiritual entity in my life. Any career and life decisions I make are based on teachings and understandings they passed on to me.



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This experience has been an unexpected joy. I am grateful to all who took this journey with me, and offered words of encouragement along the way.

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## Section 1: Introduction to the Study

The number of males teaching primary and elementary school children has declined over the past 40 years, and currently males compose less than 13% of elementary teachers in the United States (NEA Report, 2010). Male primary/elementary teachers are becoming a rare entity in today's classroom. As a result, male teachers have been in demand, in elementary schools and teacher education programs, for more than 40 years (Sanatullova-Allison, 2010).

Because of their influence, elementary teachers become important persons in children's lives (Ahtola et al., 2011). These teachers make a unique contribution to the lives of children with whom they interact. Elementary teachers challenge students and actively involve them in class by being enthusiastic, encouraging, and connecting learning at school with students' lives (Gentry, Steenbergen-Hu, & Choi, 2011). Elementary teachers are charged with providing children with the basic skills needed to sustain them throughout their education. Young children spend the majority of their day and school years, usually between 160 and 180 days depending on the state in which they live, with their elementary teacher (Digest of Education Statistics, 2011). The impact of elementary teachers varies from influencing children's self-image to affecting their success or failure in school and conceivably in other aspects of their lives.

### **Background of the Study**

A National Education Association (NEA) study indicated that a gender diverse workforce does not exist in today's elementary schools (NEA Statistics & Estimates, 2010, Table E). The report specifies that of the nearly 2 million public elementary school

teachers in the nation, at least 87% were females and only 13% were males. In the Southeast, the percentages matched those across the nation. Of the more than half a million elementary teachers, 89% were female and 11% were males (NEA Statistics & Estimates, 2010). These numbers still constitute a small percentage of elementary teachers that are males. For Alabama, the trend continues; of all the elementary teachers in the state, more than 90% were females and less than 10% were males. Increasing the number of male elementary teachers would help achieve gender diversity (NEA Statistics & Estimates, 2010). This diversity might emphasize flexibility in the gender role expectations of young children. If boys see men in nurturing positions in the elementary school, they might envision masculinity differently (Kiselica & Englar-Carlson, 2010). They might value schooling more and develop an ethic of caring, according to Brookhart, Loadman, and Farquhar (as cited in Ashcraft & Servier, 2006).

Washington (2009) emphasized that recruiting and retaining more men in primary/elementary education was vital to the future success of all children. Cushman (2007) stressed that seeing a male teacher at the elementary level could broaden children's perception of appropriate behavior. When students see both men and women performing the same duties and holding similar jobs, it allows boys and girls access to a wider range of acceptable behaviors (Ashcraft & Sevier, 2006; Cushman, 2007; Janairo, 2010; Washington, 2009). This role model was especially important to boys and girls from single parent female headed households, particularly when there was no positive male role model in the child's life. Other researchers have suggested that male teachers bring alternative modes of teaching and learning to the classroom (Thornton & Bricheno,



2008). Johnson (2009) suggested that the need for male teachers in primary and elementary schools was vital if democratic values and social justice focus were to remain an important part of people's lives. He contended that encouraging men to teach and care for children was essential and may ultimately support the promotion of democratic values in public schools.

One goal for high-quality early childhood teaching was to have an adequate number of male and female teachers, a gender diverse workforce (Janairo, Holm, Jordan, & Wright, 2010; Johnson, Middleton, Nicholson, & Sandrich, 2010; Piburn, 2010). This diversity would emphasize flexibility in the gender role expectations of young children. Rentzou and Ziganitidou's (2009) research suggested that children needed to see both men and women in caring roles. Male and female teachers needed to be visible at all levels of education including primary and elementary school. This visibility would help boys and girls avoid basic assumptions about gender (UN Division for the Advancement of Women, 2004). Gender equity between men and women might be advanced if men shared in the education of young children (Harris & Barnes, 2009). This could be a reason for inclusion rather than exclusion of male elementary teachers.

Numerous factors kept men out of teaching in primary and elementary classrooms. Low status and low pay were chief among them (Frankel, 2008; Johnson, 2008; Sanatullova-Allison, 2010). Additional deterrents, which kept men out of primary/elementary classrooms, were isolation, perception, and lack of respect. Working in an all-female environment made some men feel a sense of social isolation especially when there was no male colleague to talk with (Sanatullova-Allison, 2010; Skelton,

2009). Some males avoid primary/elementary teaching because of negative perceptions associated with it; they fear being perceived as homosexuals or pedophiles (Ashcraft & Sevier, 2006). Others avoid it because they felt they would be disrespected simply because they worked with primary/elementary school children. They were victims of rankism, subtle behaviors that devalue people based on their perceived importance because of job, income, power, or influence in society (Fuller, 2008). Fuller advocated treating everyone with dignity; people's lives change when they are treated with dignity, and people's lives change when they are treated with dishonor. "Dignity for all is a stepping stone to realizing the democratic promise of liberty and justice for all," (Fuller, 2008, p. 81). While those factors point to some reasons that males avoided primary/elementary classrooms, other factors point to reasons that they were needed in those classrooms.

Janairo, Holm, Jordan, and Wright (2010) began a dialogue about male elementary teachers and the need to increase the gender diversity in primary/elementary education. They suggested that men were rare in the early education environment, and adding more male teachers in the early grades would allow children to see teachers of both genders with whom to relate and respond. A study by researchers Harris and Barnes (2009) pointed to findings that gender equity between men and women would be advanced if men shared in the care and education of young children. If one assumed that teaching young children was suitable only for females and not for males, this would restrict the opportunity for both males and females (Piburn, Nelson, & Carson, 2011). Teaching young children is an appropriate and necessary role for women and men. This

research focused on men who chose to teach young children and what the experience was like for them.

Piburn (2010) suggested that numerous global organizations share a common belief that experiencing gender equity in primary/elementary education was good for young children, their families, and society. Schools and other social institutions with a uniform work force did not inspire gender equity, social justice, and other important democratic values (Johnson, 2008). One of the most important voices in addressing these issues was the voice of the male teacher in the primary/elementary classroom (Piburn, Nelson, & Carson, 2011). The voice of students, parents, and administrators were established in the discussion, but the voice of the male teacher was not heard as much. This study hoped to help recognize this underrepresented population.

### **Problem Statement**

The number of male teachers serving in urban, suburban, and rural elementary classrooms is in decline, and this decline had continued for more than 40 years (NEA Rankings & Estimates, 2010). The problem is that few males choose primary/elementary teaching as a career choice. The disproportionate number (approximately 5%) of male to female elementary teachers in most southeastern counties in Alabama was evidence of this decline and problem. This study focused on one large urban/suburban/rural district, and two small rural districts. These districts represent the kind of diversity that can be expected in this region: large and small districts, and urban, suburban, and rural districts.

Teacher education program coordinators, school superintendents, school board members, and other education professionals may benefit from having this information as

it may also promote collaboration in the development of programs designed to recruit and retain male elementary teachers. Several studies have addressed some distinctive problems that men deal with in the profession (Evans & Jones, 2008; Johnson, 2008, 2009; Parr, Gosse, & Allison, 2008). This phenomenological inquiry explored how male elementary teachers identify their day-to-day classroom experiences and the tasks they face as they work with young children in their individual urban, suburban, or rural school environments. This study gives voice to male primary/elementary teachers from their unique perspective.

### **Nature of the Study**

A phenomenological approach is most appropriate for studying affective, emotional, human experiences (Merriam, 2000). In this study, the method focused on the essence of the experience of male elementary teachers; it employed key factors from Moustakas's (1994) procedures for conducting human science research. This particular method followed five basic steps (Creswell, 2003):

1. Data collection and revision of the data based on individual responses
2. Transcription and analysis of data
3. Determination of core or main themes
4. Description and development of core themes
5. Synthesis of core themes into composite descriptions of the participants' reported. (pp. 191-196)

In accordance with the chosen design, in-depth interviews of male elementary teachers from three different systems were conducted. All participants were queried on their daily

experience in the classroom. They were asked to describe the experience including the positives and negatives of being an elementary teacher.

### **Research Question**

The research question involved understanding what it was like to be a male teacher in a primary/elementary classroom, and determining what key factors may have added to or distracted from the overall experience. Information was sought that might be useful to individuals such as board of education members, superintendents of schools, deans of teacher preparation programs, and prospective male teachers. The research question informed from the literature review of this study was based on Levinson's (1978) adult male development theory, Palmer's (2007) teaching landscape and Mezirow's (2002) transformative learning theory. The question this study explored was: How do male teachers describe their experience of teaching young children in a primary/elementary school environment? In an attempt to answer this question, the research focused on three main areas that encompassed the conceptual framework of the study:

- Participant's age range and teaching experience (Levinson, 1978)
- Participant's perception of teaching (Palmer, 2007)
- Participant's life experiences, goals, relationship and comfort level with students (Mezirow, 1990, 2000, 2009)

More detailed research questions were included in the methodology under Section 3.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to better understand and define the male teacher experience in the elementary school setting. As a minority population in many school systems and in numerous schools, male elementary teachers have unique experiences. Some schools within the local region have no male elementary teachers, and other schools have a small percentage of male elementary teachers. This study hoped to discover some of the unique experiences of being a male elementary teacher from the male teachers' point of view. The lived experiences of male elementary teachers in three southeastern school districts were examined. This inquiry explored the perceptions of novice and experienced teachers and how they characterized their experiences in the classroom every day. Information gathered could be used to inform teacher training program coordinators, superintendents, boards of education, and male prospective teachers. This research focused on men who choose to teach young children and what the experience was like for them.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework which drove this study was based on the work of Levinson (1978), the works of Palmer (1997, 2007), and Mezirow (1990, 2000, 2009). All focused on various aspects of phenomena that might have impacted the daily lives of male elementary teachers. The emphases of these theorists on adult male development, the landscape of teaching, and the impact of transformative learning experiences drove the research questions for this study.

**Daniel Levinson**

Levinson (1978) focused on adult male development especially as it related to the world of work. He emphasized the relationship between adult male life stages and various job change decisions (Hill & Miller, 1981; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson & McKee, 1978). He believed that adult males were periodically faced with new but predictable developmental tasks during their lives and that working through these new challenges was the essence of adulthood (Levinson et al., 1978). Levinson stressed that a developmental sequence arose during adulthood just as it did during childhood and adolescence. The “life cycle” described by Levinson evolved through a standard sequence of developmental periods (Kittrell, 1998, p. 106; Levinson et al., 1978). He described the process of skills acquirement, values, and credentials once a man made an initial choice of an occupation.

If a man failed to develop a more differentiated occupational identity and establish himself within the occupational world, he might drop out, and start a new career. At that point, he might try several different paths before choosing a new profession and life direction (Levinson et al., 1978). This study queried men who initially chose elementary teaching as well as those who chose it as a second career path. Some male elementary teachers were affected by adult male development as delineated in Levinson’s theory; they were also touched by Palmer’s (2007) teaching landscape.

**Parker Palmer**

Palmer’s (2007) theory stressed the connection between the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual landscape of teaching. Some men might connect to the teaching

landscape spiritually, others might connect emotionally, and some others might connect intellectually; some might connect in all three of the ways he described. Palmer described intellect as the way a teacher thinks about teaching and learning. Emotion involved the feelings of teachers and students in the way they teach and learn respectively during the process. The spiritual, he defined as the “diverse ways the teacher answered the heart’s longing to be connected with the largeness of life” (Palmer, 2007, p. 5). This yearning inspired the love and work of teaching because teaching is a spiritual journey. It gave insight to what was happening inside each individual as he/she did the job. Palmer felt that teachers who were connected with the largeness of life made a difference because they gave students a bigger sense of reality, and that could be transformative (Powell, 2001).

### **Jack Mezirow**

Mezirow and associates (2000, 2004, 2009) described transformative learning as the “social process of constructing and appropriating a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience as a guide to action” (1994, p. 222). His transformative learning theory suggested some ways adults make meaning of their lives. Just as Levinson stressed the developmental sequence that occurred during adulthood, Mezirow suggested that there were phases that adults go through when transformative learning occurred (Kimmell & Seifert, 2009). These phases according to Mezirow and Associates (2000) include:

- A disorienting dilemma;
- Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame;



- A critical assessment of assumptions;
- Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared;
- Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions;
- Planning a course of action;
- Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing ones plans;
- Provisional trying new roles;
- Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships;  
and
- A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective. (p. 22)

Mezirow (2000) suggested an adult education theory which proposed some ways adults make meaning of their lives. This was comparable to Levinson's ideas of a developmental order that was evident during adulthood just as it was during childhood and adolescence.

Each theory accepted that numerous insights influence the choices that individuals made, including the choice to become a teacher. Teachers can "help students learn a great deal or keep them from learning much at all" (Palmer, 2007, p. 7). The purpose of this study was to listen to the voice of male elementary teachers as they articulated their classroom experiences and reflected on their relationship with students and their parents, co-workers and the community. The teacher is always the key influence of the learning environment within the classroom.

## Operational Definitions

*Co-researcher:* This refers to an individual who agreed to participate as an interview subject in a phenomenological research study (Moustakas, 1994).

*Elementary school:* For the purpose of this study, the primary/elementary grades included pre-kindergarten through grade 6 as designated by the Rules of the Alabama State Board of Education, Chapter 290-3-3 Teacher Education Professional Services (Morton, 2005).

*Gendered occupation:* An occupational field is gendered if it reflects the experience, prejudice, or orientation of one sex more than the other, and if a least 85% of the employees are of one sex and work is defined in gendered terms (Sargent & Associates, 2005).

*Intellectual:* The way an individual thinks about teaching and learning; how the individual knows and learns (Palmer, 2007, p. 5).

*Lived experience:* This term is used in phenomenological studies to emphasize the importance of people's individual experiences as conscious human beings (Moustakas, 1994).

*Noema:* The appearance of an object or item as the perceiving subject apprehends it (Moustakas, 1994, p. 69).

*Noesis:* How beliefs are acquired; how it is that we are experiencing what we are experiencing (Moustakas, 1994, p. 69).

*Point of view:* A conglomeration of belief, attitude, and feeling, generally subject to change, and strongly influenced by habits of mind (Mezirow, 2009).

*Rankism*: Rankism involves position, power, and title in a hierarchy (Fuller, 2004, p. 13). Abuse of power attached to rank (Fuller & Gerloff, 2008, p. 8).

*Settling Down period*: A crucial step in adult male development that gave certain relationships, aspirations, and aspects of the self a prominent place in one's life while requiring that others be made secondary or put aside (Levinson, 1978, p. 139).

*Spiritual*: The diverse way an individual answered the heart's longing to be connected with the largeness of life; a longing that animates love and work, especially the work of teaching (Palmer, 2007, p. 5).

*Transformative Learning*: Learning which results in the reformulation of a meaning perspective through critical self-reflection, to allow a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative understanding of one's experiences (Mezirow & Associates, 1990, p. xvi).

### **Assumptions, Limitations, Scope, and Delimitations**

Researchers conduct qualitative phenomenological research because they want to concentrate on a description of the experience of participants (Creswell, 2007). A fundamental assumption was that the participants would feel comfortable enough to share the details of their experiences. Details can only come from talking directly with participants, male elementary teachers, and allowing them to tell their stories. Empowering the male elementary teachers, also referred to as co-researchers, to share their stories and experiences allowed others to hear their voices; this minimized any type of power relationship that might exist. It was assumed that participants' responses to the

interview questions would be as honest and accurate as possible and that the resulting data would correctly reflect their opinions and perceptions.

The parameters for a research study establish the boundaries, exceptions, reservations, and qualifications inherent in the study: delimitations, and limitations (Creswell, 2003). Delimitations narrow the scope of the study. This study confined itself to in-depth face-to-face interviews with six purposefully selected male elementary teachers from three school districts, one large and two small, in the same southeastern state. Morse (1994) suggested including a minimum of six participants in a phenomenological study. Further, considerations will be made to include a representative sample of the male teacher diversity found in the selected research districts once interview participants have been identified.

Limitations identify potential weaknesses of the study. A possible limitation that was considered in this study was the time frame in which the study was conducted. The study was conducted over a four week period. Another potential weakness, the purposive sampling and procedure and sample size rendered the findings not generalizable (Creswell, 2003).

### **Significance of the Study**

This research focused on gaining an understanding of the world of male teachers in an elementary school setting as they worked with children, parents, and coworkers. Several studies have focused on the inadequate number of men in the elementary school environment (Fetter, 2008; Janairo, Jordan, Wright, & Holm, 2010; Rentzou & Ziganitidou, 2009). However, not enough research has been done concerning the impact

of the experience of male elementary teachers from the male teacher's unique perspective.

This study might be noteworthy to school administrators, college of education administrators, and males interested in a career in elementary teaching. In addition, it might provide college of education administrators with answers to questions about the male elementary teacher experience. Finally, this study might give males considering a career in education an insight into the customary experience of a male teacher in an elementary school environment, and inform other males who had not considered elementary teaching as a career what the lived experience is like for a male elementary school teacher.

### **Summary and Transition**

The purpose of this study was to describe and better understand the male elementary teachers' experiences in the classroom. The study also addressed the need for primary/elementary teachers as a critical part of social change, a vital part of our values in a democratic society. Statistics showed that there was a lack of a gender diverse workforce in many elementary schools. Several researchers identified various reasons for the lack of gender diversity. This study explored the work of Levinson (1978) to determine adult developmental sequence; the works of Palmer (1999, 2007) to view the intellectual, spiritual, and emotional landscape of teaching; and the works of Mezirow (1990, 2009) to determine how adults make meaning of their lives. The qualitative phenomenological research design selected for this study was based on the

phenomenological method developed by Moustakas (1994), which illustrated the phenomenon as experienced by the participants involved.

This study consisted of five sections. The first section introduced the study and provided the background and the main purpose of the study. Additionally, this section highlighted the study's assumptions, limitations, and organization. The second section established the framework for the study through a review of the relevant literature. The third section presented the methodology, a description of the participants and the procedures used to gather data. The fourth section presented the analysis and interpretation of data. This section focused mainly on emerging themes for individual participants as well as for the whole group. The fifth and final section offered a summary and conclusion to the study as well as recommendations that might be relevant to school systems, colleges of education, and the community at large.

## Section 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

Section 1 identified some of the major challenges faced by male elementary teachers. It identified the problem statement, research question, relevance of the study, assumptions, and limitations of the study. This literature review section focused on the historical perspective of the role of the male teacher. It also emphasized initiatives to stop the global decline of the male elementary teacher workforce, and various themes concerned with the world of the male elementary teacher. Some of those included programs designed to attract males to elementary teaching and others focused on exploring men's roles in the lives of young children. The purpose of this study was to understand and define the challenges that male elementary teachers faced as they immersed themselves in the elementary school setting. In addition, the study also explored how male developmental seasons, the teaching viewpoint, and transformative learning experiences may have enhanced the essence of their teaching environment.

Moustakas (1994) described the review of the literature related to the phenomenological study as an integral part of the literature review of the study. Cooper (as cited in Moustakas, 1994) identified four methods (integrative, theoretical, methodological, and thematic) of discussing this literature. The integrative approach was broad and generated new knowledge about the topic. It presented the "state of knowledge" relevant to the topic, and pulled information from numerous studies that have been reviewed (Moustakas, 1990, p. 112). The theoretical review probed theories that account for the phenomenon. The methodological review focused on the research

methods used in other published works. The thematic review organized important themes, informed other studies, and presented the findings with the suggested themes. The most appropriate methods for this study were a combination of integrative and thematic approaches; those methods allowed exploration of Palmer's (2007) focus on the role of the teacher and the internal landscape of intellect, emotion, and spirit of the teacher. It also allowed for new knowledge about the relationship of Mezirow's (2000, 2002) transformative learning for male elementary teachers and a connection to the adult male development phases associated with Levinson (1974).

To conduct the literature review, research was gathered by using keyword searches of scholarly journals online through EBSCOhost, PROQUEST, Academic Search Premier, Education: A Sage Full-Text Collection, Education Research Complete, the Thoreau Multiple Databases through the Walden University Library, and through Google Scholar. Searches were conducted using keywords such as *male elementary teachers*, *motivation for teaching*, *the lack of men in education*, *male teachers as role models*, and *teacher quality*. In addition, books relating to transformative learning, adult development, teaching landscape, and phenomenology were obtained from Amazon and other sources.

### **Historical Perspective of the Role of the Male Elementary Teacher in America**

In Puritan society, schools were initially formed to maintain the existing society and its current trends. Different educational customs and traditions were observed, based on where the colonies were located. The Southern Colonies, the Mid-Atlantic Colonies, and the New England Colonies all had different educational customs. The Massachusetts



education law of 1642 required parents to make sure their children knew the principles of religion and the laws of Massachusetts (Cubberley, 1934). The 1647 law required towns of 50 or more families to hire a school master (a male) who would teach children to read and write.

### **The Southern Colonies**

The Southern Colonies had their own reasons to limit the teaching of reading and writing; only the wealthy plantation owners developed an education system to prepare their sons for future education. Again a school master was hired to educate those who were fortunate enough to be exposed to schooling (Spurill, 1998). However, their educational environment was permanently changed after the Civil War. Women began to participate, in large numbers, in the educational system. In addition, many of the former slaves, who could not legally be educated prior to the Civil War, had educational doors opened to them because it was not illegal to educate former slaves. During the war, many women filled jobs previously held by men; teaching was one such job (Cubberley, 1934).

### **The Mid-Atlantic Colonies**

The Mid-Atlantic Colonies were diverse in population origins and thus in their religious beliefs. The middle colonies contained Native American tribes of Algonquian and Iroquois language groups as well as a sizable percentage of African slaves during the early years. The presence of Quakers, Mennonites, Lutherans, Dutch Calvinist, and Presbyterians made the dominance of one faith virtually impossible (Berkin, Berlin, et.al, American History, 2012). The Mid-Atlantic Colonies attempted to sponsor a school for

both white and Native American children, but their early efforts failed. These colonies hired a school master to instruct the children (Purvis, 1999).

### **The New England Colonies**

In the New England Colonies, children were required to read so that they might become acquainted with God's commandments and learn what was demanded of them (Cubberley, 1934). Puritans believed that the Bible was the guide to salvation; they thought that children should learn to read the Bible and that schools should be established for that purpose (Ragan & Shepherd, 1976). There was hardly any other rationale in the preservation of elementary schools. Clifton Johnson (as cited in Cubberley, 1934) wrote:

The children were perpetually involved, weekdays and Sundays, in an atmosphere saturated with religious forms, services, ideas and language. Powers of darkness and of light were struggling for the possession of every youthful soul, and it was the duty of parents, ministers, and teachers to lose no opportunity to pluck the children as brands from the burning. (p. 41)

### **Religious Focus and Evolving Teacher Role**

Religious content was the main reading matter, aside from the instruction in Latin, in the grammar schools (Gelbrich, OSU, 1999). This dominance of the religious function in early colonial instruction was well revealed in textbooks used. The *New England Primer*, which was the most-used book in colonial schools, continued to be used for more than 100 years. It had been estimated that more than three million copies were sold. This fact gave additional evidence of the religious motivation for education. The book contained an illustrated alphabetical rhyme, beginning with "In Adam's fall, we sinned

all,” and ending with “Zacheas he did climb a tree his Lord to see” (Regan & Shepherd, 1976). It also contained a list of the books in the Old and New Testaments, the Lord’s Prayer, the Apostle Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Shorter Catechism, which set the principles of Christianity forward. Thus, it is not surprising that the Puritans chose male teachers to show the faithful how to find their way to God.

Prior to 1830, the teaching profession in some regions was made up almost entirely of men (Elsbree, 1939). During early colonial days, the few educated persons were white men. Therefore, the colonial teacher was almost always a schoolmaster rather than a schoolmistress. The generally held belief was that a woman’s place was in the home, not in the classroom (Elsbree, 1939). The educational landscape for men and women changed dramatically during and after the Civil War. Women became a fixture in many classrooms because men were not available. After the war, many men chose other jobs and teaching especially in the early grades was thought of as female domain. As men began to leave the teaching profession, educated young women who sought advancement in society attempted to fill the void. Teaching incurred an association with domesticity, nurturance, and child rearing, and began to be seen as less appropriate for men (Martino & Kehler, 2006). Society considered men less than ideal teachers because they were not believed to have the ability to mother or nourish young children, and were perceived to be more inclined to be distracted by worldly forces. Women were available to teach because they had fewer occupational options and could be paid less than their male counterparts (Snyder & Hoffman, 2000). From the mid-1800s to the early 1980s, women began dominating elementary teaching while men continued to dominate certain

academic specialties and leadership positions (Snyder & Hoffman, 2000). The image of teachers has continued to evolve.

### **Current Initiatives to Slow the Decline of Male Elementary Teachers**

For more than a decade, policy makers have articulated their concern about the declining numbers of male elementary teachers and its resulting outcome on children (Friedman, 2010; Halpern 2010; Hightower, 2010; Johnson, Middleton, Nicholson, & Sandrich 2010). As men were conspicuously absent in today's elementary classrooms, the call for a gender diverse teacher workforce in elementary schools was a global objective (Martino & Rezai-Reshti, 2010; Nelson & Shikwambi, 2010).

#### **United States**

In the United States, a recent report by Pytel (2006) of the National Education Association confirmed that only 25% of the nation's 3 million teachers were men, and a much smaller percentage of that number consisted of male elementary teachers. A more recent study by the NEA (2010) indicated that, of the 1,895,006 public school elementary teachers in the nation, at least 1,630,135 or 87% were females and only 246,872 or 13% were males. In the Southeast, the numbers were similar, of the 513,461 elementary teachers, 457,686 or 89% were female, and 55,774 or 11% were male. The numbers for Alabama were comparable, of the 25,519 elementary teachers in the state, 23,050 or 90% were female, and 2,469 or 10% were male (NEA Report, 2010).

Although public school systems throughout the United States looked for men who wanted to fill roles in primary and elementary schools, a coordinated effort to recruit male teachers had not been successful for numerous reasons. Some experts remain

unconvinced that more male teachers were needed in primary and elementary school classrooms (Snyder, 2008). Sakellarios and Rentzou's (2007) research stipulates the stereotypical beliefs about the role of men in relation to young children (p. 48).

### **Africa and South America**

Africa and South America also had initiatives to increase the number of male teachers of young children. Kenya's early childhood education center worked with other African nations to recruit male trainers of young children. Very few men worked at the preschool level. As recent as 2009, Brazil held a symposium to support the Rio Declaration, 2009 that would, "encourage men to share with women the pleasures and responsibilities of caregiving and to support workplaces that were gender equitable and inclusive" (Piburn, 2010, p. 49).

### **European Union**

The European Union (EU) established a network that cultivated and initiated a campaign to recruit men to early care education (ECE). Similar initiatives in Denmark were quite successful in the 1990s; gender diversity became a political concern (Piburn, 2010). The Norwegian Ministry of Children and Family Affairs established a mixed gender workforce for ECE recruits in the 1990s. While Norway increased the percentage of males higher than any other EU nation, they still fell short of their goal according to Peters (2008). In England, a media advertising campaign to increase the number of males was not completely successful, but strong efforts continued (Piburn, 2010).

## **Australia**

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, there were specific changes occurring in the gender structure of preprimary to secondary teachers in Australia. In New South Wales, Australia, the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Training maintained that over 250 schools had no male teachers (Smith, 2004). Many of the children in South Australia were taught by a mixed gender teaching team (Harris & Barnes, 2009). The Department of Education Children's Services as reported in Harris & Barnes (2009) indicated that of the 222 teachers in South Australian kindergarten, only three were males. In New Zealand, the percentage of male teachers in primary schools had fallen from 42% to 18% over the past 5 decades (Cushman, 2007).

### **Programs Which Emphasized Attracting Males to Elementary Teaching**

Numerous programs were available that were intended to attract males to elementary teaching. *MenTeach* and *Call Me MISTER* were two of the most successful programs that were designed for entry level students interested in teaching (Johnson, 2008). Alternative certification programs such as Troops to Teachers, Teach for America, and Mizzou Men for Excellence in Elementary Teaching (MMEET), were designed to help participants with non-education degrees become certified teachers. All of the programs were not exclusively gendered toward males; one of the objectives of all of the programs was to get more men involved in teaching elementary school children.

## **Men Teach**

MenTeach.org ([www.MenTeach.org](http://www.MenTeach.org)) served as an international clearinghouse for research, education and advocacy for increasing the number of males teaching young children. The program began in 1979 in Minnesota and continues today. Educational support such as workshops, conferences and retreats, were provided for both men and women who were interested in teaching young children (Piburn, 2010). Bryan Nelson (2010), one of the founding directors of MenTeach.org suggested five strategies to recruit and retain men to teach young children.

- Have men work with children immediately because their initial awkwardness may cause supervisors or parents to judge them harshly.
- Provide a mentor because a good mentor is an important element in a teacher's successful development.
- Facilitate a men's support group. This allows them to discuss issues relevant to their experiences, and avoids isolation especially for a male who may be the only one of his gender at the school site.
- Offer men a scholarship or stipend because teaching is often less financially attractive than other fields.
- Adopt the program's culture to welcome men. (pp. 37-39)

It was important that the male students faced a welcome, not a hostile environment (Nelson, & Shikwambi, 2010). Adopting and implementing these strategies might cause more men to have a positive experience, and encourage more of them to remain in elementary school classrooms.

### **Call me Mister**

The *Call Me MISTER* recruitment program was launched in South Carolina in 1999 at Clemson University (Call Me MISTER, 2012). MISTER, an acronym for Mentors Instructing Students Toward Effective Role Models, was developed by some of South Carolina's educational leaders who wanted to assist with the recruitment, training and certification of elementary teachers who planned to teach in South Carolina schools, especially in the lowest performing elementary schools (Call Me MISTER, 2012). This program provided tuition assistance and leadership training to participants. The following 13 colleges in South Carolina were affiliated with the MISTER program: Anderson University, Benedict College, Claflin University, Clemson University, College of Charleston, Coastal Carolina University, Greenville Technical College, Midlands Technical College, Morris College, South Carolina State University, Tri-County Technical College, Trident Technical College, and the University of South Carolina-Beaufort. Institutions in five other states also partner with the MISTER program: The North East Florida Educational Consortium (NEFEC), Eastern Kentucky State University, Metropolitan Community College of Missouri; Cheyney University in Pennsylvania, and Longwood University of Virginia. The program continues to grow and expand to other institutions. In May 2012, the program was expanded to Mississippi at Jackson State University as a result of a \$200,000 grant from the W.K. Kellogg foundation of Battle Creek Michigan (Smiles, 2002). While the MISTER program specifically addressed the lack of African American male elementary teachers, it was open to all students in areas where the program existed.



### **Troops to Teachers**

Troops to teachers, a federal program which began in 1994, was designed to assist eligible military personnel reach their goal of becoming a teacher in the public school system. The program, the inspiration of J. H. Hexter, provided counseling and referral services for eligible military personnel who agreed to teach for at least three years in any school district that received Title I funds. More than 3,800 troops were hired as teachers through the program between the enactment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2002 and the close of the 2004-2005 school year. This program changed the teacher population in that over 80% of the Troops to Teachers were male and over 25% were African American according to the Government Accountability Office, GAO (GAO-06-25, 2006). At least 14% of the teachers hired served in elementary schools (GAO, 2006). This program continues to assist eligible candidates.

### **Mizzou men for Excellence in Elementary Teaching (MMEET)**

Founded by Dr. Roy F. Fox, in 2007 at the University of Missouri at Columbia, MMEET was committed to helping men who were highly-motivated, articulate, skilled, compassionate teachers succeed in teaching elementary school children. MMEET wanted to raise public awareness of the importance of men in the classroom. The program began as part of an accelerated master's degree curriculum for students already certified as teachers who did not have a full-time teaching job (University of Missouri, 2009). Some of the benefits of the program included:

- Consistent support from peers and other professionals

- Mentoring from experienced male elementary teachers, administrators and psychologists who focus on boys and men
- A stipend for attending and fully participating (discussing, reading, writing blogging, etc.) in seminars
- Travel expenses for those driving 40 miles (one way) to monthly meetings (University of Missouri, 2009).

This program continued to accept, train and place eligible individuals.

### **Teach for America**

Teach for America (TFA), a non-profit organization founded in 1990 was designed to recruit top recent college graduates to teach for at least 2 years in hard to staff urban and rural public schools (Katz, 2007; Lahann & Regan, 2011). TFA members were required to undergo an intense five-week training program at one of five TFA summer preparation institutes across the country. TFA's teacher corps grew from 500 in six sites, in 1990, to over 7,000 in 170 sites in 2010 (Heilig, Cole, & Springel, 2011).

TFA had numerous regional and national sponsors who had contributed between \$1 million and \$50 million to the non-profit over the past 20 years. The Walton Family Foundation and Sue and Steve Mandel had contributed more than \$50 million each. The Eli & Edythe Broad Foundation, Laura and John Arnold Foundation, Doris & Donald Fisher Fund and the Robinson Foundation had contributed between \$25 million and \$49,999,999. At least ten foundations including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation had contributed between \$10 million and \$24,999,999 each. Wells Fargo gave more than \$15 million to TFA. More than 130 foundations have contributed individually between \$1

million and \$9,999,999. Numerous other organizations and foundations had contributed various amounts to the TFA fund (Teach for America, 2012). Despite these generous contributions, some critics have questioned TFA's commitment to improving education.

Critics have attacked TFA for requiring only a 2 year commitment in schools that already have rapid teacher turnover rates ((Veltri, B., 2012; Lipka, S., 2007; & Haliday, A. 2006). Some of these critics feel that TFA compromised teaching as a profession by minimizing the importance of pre-service preparation and casting teaching as a prelude to a higher status career that many TFA members enter after their TFA service experience (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011). The specific impact of TFA teachers is still unclear; more than a decade worth of peer reviewed research involving TFA recruits concluded that novice TFA recruits had a significant negative effect on elementary students' reading achievement when compared to fully prepared teachers (Helig, Cole & Springel, 2011). TFA currently exists in 28 states and the District of Columbia. The program began in Alabama schools in 2010. More than 44% of all TFA recruits work in Southern states (Helig, Cole & Springel, 2011). TFA was recruiting in all teaching disciplines.

### **Exploring Men's Roles in the Lives of Young Children**

Research on men's influence on children has not focused directly on male elementary teachers, male parents or male athletic coaches. It has concentrated instead on effects of father absence, particularly in families living in poverty (Honig, 2008). The focus here was on males that generally interact with young children, namely, male coaches, male parents, and male teachers. The degree of involvement by these males depended on a number of variables including the community in which the child lived, the

presence or absence of a male parent or surrogate, or the presence of a male teacher in the school that the child attends.

### **Role of Male Teachers**

Numerous studies (Johnson, 2008; Weaver-Hightower, 2011) have focused on some of the unique challenges of being a male elementary teacher. Some demanding and contradictory tasks discouraged males from teaching young children. In some instances, these teachers were seen as important role models in society especially for single parent female headed households. At other times, these males were the objects of suspicion manifested both in homophobia or accusations of abuse (Evans & Jones, 2008; Washington, 2009). Male teachers frequently faced greater scrutiny when touching children and when they were alone with children (Weaver-Hightower, 2011). Male teachers must be more aware of physical contact with children because caring behaviors might be misinterpreted as being sexually motivated. This compromises efforts to recruit young men to teaching (Washington, 2009).

Male elementary teachers bring a unique perspective to their school environment. Researchers Harris and Barnes (2009) concluded that teacher gender was a factor which shaped the behavior of young children. One male kindergarten teacher referred to his students as sprouts because they were “tiny plants reaching for the warmth of the sun, yearning to become something magnificent” (Halpern, 2010, p. 64). Working with small children helped him view the world with innocence and curiosity. Many elementary teachers have a profound effect on the lives of their students; they have the ability of making the world of the child a wonderful place or a place of dread. Sakellarios and

Rentzou (2007) recognized that male teachers had been considered essential for the development of the “whole child” and for the provision of extraordinary education for young children (p. 48). Young children benefit from seeing male teachers in their schools, and a male parent or surrogate in the home.

### **Role of the Male Parent**

The male parent whether biological, step-parent, adopted parent, or foster parent was important in the lives of young children. A study by Honig (2008) indicated that fatherless children were more likely to live in poverty than children living with both parents. She asserted that children in father absent families were reported to have lower educational achievements, more aggression, and less self-regulation. Boys from such households are more likely to become involved in a life of crime and girls are more likely to become teenage mothers (Owens, 2010). Numerous variables must be considered in studying fathering. Age, culture, social class, education, and work history all affect fathers' behavior with their children (Honig, 2008).

The age, cultural history, social class and education level of fathers affects their parenting skills. Children of teenage fathers were at greater risk for abuse than children with older, more mature fathers. This idea coincides with Levinson's (1978) emphasis on the importance of age in the developmental stages that encompass certain life experiences. In most societies, a man is expected “to marry and to take certain responsibilities within a familial system” (Levinson, 1978, p. 45). The participation of fathers in child care affects the mental, physical, and social development of the child (Ozcebe et al., 2011). This makes the father or surrogate's participation crucial.

### **Role of Male Athletic Coaches**

Numerous children participate in non-school sports programs supervised by over 2.5 million adults. These programs provide an environment in which youth can develop the skills and attitudes that will prepare them for many of life's challenges (Murray, 2009). Youth sports participants may gain a greater sense of creativity by learning numerous values such as emotional control and how to push themselves (Dworking & Larson, 2006).

Coaches occupy a central and influential role with young people who participate in sports. According to the National Alliance for Youth Sports (NAYS, 2009), coaches strongly influence the nature and quality of the sport experience of the child. Adults who coach children play a critical role in the coaching process and in creating a positive climate in which development of the child may occur (Murray, 2009).

Volunteer coaches are the backbone of youth sports in America. Without the numerous volunteers signing up to coach youth sports every season, the youth sports world would vanish. One of the goals of the youth coaches association is to make all children that participate in an athletic activity feel appreciated. They teach and encourage good sportsmanship by appropriate behavior after the loss of a game (National Alliance of Youth Coaches, Volunteer Coaches, 2012). Coaches can play an especially influential role in the processes that affect the development of the child. The main goal in coaching young children is to make sure that the children have fun, develop good habits, and have a desire to play next season.

### **Adult Development, Teaching Landscape, and Transformative Learning Theory**

Male elementary teachers came to teaching from a number of places and for a variety of reasons. Some may have transitioned as a result of what Levinson (1978) described as male life stages. Others may have undergone a transformative learning experience, described by Mezirow (1990), which may have caused them to choose teaching as a first or second career choice. Still others may have connected to teaching emotionally, spiritually, or intellectually according to Palmer (2007). All of the theorists suggest variables that could influence the day to day classroom experience of the male elementary teacher.

#### **Levinson and Adult Male Development**

The study of adult development had been advanced for a little more than 50 years; that is a relatively short period of time compared to psychology and other well established disciplines. Levinson (1986) pondered the age-linked developmental periods in adulthood as he advanced his theory of adult male development. He believed that men go through a series of eras in the course of their lives. Each era has its own “bio-psychosocial character and each makes its distinctive contribution to the whole” (Levinson, 1986, p. 5). The first era, pre-adulthood, extends from birth to age 22. The individual grows through childhood and adolescence to the beginning of a more independent, responsible adult life. This era includes an early adult transition developmental period which extends into the second era.

The second era, early adulthood extends from ages 17 to 45; it began with early adult transition and included middle transition from ages 40 to 45. This was the adult era

of greatest energy and abundance, and of greatest contradiction and stress. During this era, the individual made initial choices in love, occupation, friendship and values.

The third era, middle adulthood, extended from ages 40 to 65. During this era, biological capacities were below those of early adulthood. This era also involved a time of crisis in the meaning, direction and value of each individual's life. Choices are made, and a new life structure can be formed (Levinson, 1986). Some men choose elementary teaching as a second career choice during this era.

### **Palmer and Teaching Landscape**

Palmer (2007) explored the "inner landscape of the teaching self" (p. 5). He emphasized that in education, so much depended on the teacher, not the curriculum, not the textbook, but on that human resource which was present with students every day. Palmer stressed "the selfhood of the teacher" (p. 7). Young students in lower grades only cared about whether the teacher was real, and the children could sense whether the teacher was real and responded accordingly. Education was a spiritual journey in which one came to know his/her true self and his place in this complex world (Borko & Liston, 2008). Real teachers and good teaching were essential to a productive classroom. "Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (Palmer, 2007, p. 10). Real teachers and good teaching were the key elements that made a classroom, a school and a school system successful.

### **Mezirow and Transformative Learning Theory**

"Transformative Learning is about change, dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live" according to Merriam (2007, p.



123). It is the kind of learning we do as we formulate sense of our lives. This can affect the way we view our work, family, and the world. Mezirow & Associates (2000) stated:

Transformative learning refers to the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove true or justified to guide action. (p. 7)

All teachers have habits of mind, which are deeply embedded assumptions that they held; a point of view, an outward perspective that they took in response to a given life world situation (Mezirow, 2000); and a “learning past” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 58), experience that had shaped how teachers learn and how they perceived that learning (Mezirow, 2009). Habits of Mind of teaching were changed as one experienced life. Values and assumptions about teaching were affected by family, colleagues, the community in which one lives and institutions with which one was associated (Cranton & King, 2003). Many teachers experienced some kind of transformative experience during the process of learning. This study examined the lived experiences of male elementary teachers and the relationship of transformative components in the lives of these teachers of young children.

Mezirow (2000) described transformative learning as a lifelong phenomenon; indicating that meaningful change and the learning process never stops. Learning could be categorized as instrumental and communicative. Transformative learning occurs when individuals improve their instrumental and communicative competence and develop more

functional frames of reference (Mezirow, & Associates, 2000). Instrumental learning helped learners achieve their short term objectives, and focused on task-orientated problem solving and determination of cause and effect relationship. Its main focus was on problem solving and controlling or manipulating the environment or people.

Communicative learning involved how others communicate their feelings, needs, and desires with another person (Mezirow, 2000). Teaching primarily required communicative knowledge (Cranton & King, 2003). According to Lovat and Clement (2008), this meant more than the transmission and reception of knowledge; it involved providing conditions where students were actively engaged in knowledge-making and growing as human beings.

### **Research Traditions**

Creswell (2007) defined qualitative research as an inquiry process of understanding based on a distinct methodological tradition of inquiry, including the exploration of a social or human problem. He identified five research strategies associated with the qualitative approach: (a) narrative, the study of the life of one individual; (b) phenomenology, the study, including a description, of the experiences of several individuals as they experience a common phenomenon; (c) grounded theory, developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), required the researcher to generate a theory of a process, action or interaction; (d) ethnography, the study of an entire cultural group of individuals who interact over a period of time; and (e) case study, the study of an intensive description and analysis of a phenomenon or social unit such as an individual, group institution, or community.

The researcher did not find the narrative study strategy broad enough for this study, nor did grounded theory seem appropriate. Whereas phenomenology gave rise to the meaning of experience for several individuals, grounded theory moved beyond description into generating a theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Ethnology involved extended observations and interviews of the group, requiring the researcher to become engrossed in the day-to-day lives of the participants (Creswell, 2007). Observational data alone would not be sufficient to research the lived experiences of the participants. A case study would not suit this research because a case study could include the viewpoint of an indefinite number of individuals of a bounded system, and a phenomenological study included the perspectives of individual participants (Merriam, 2002).

The qualitative phenomenological research design chosen for this study was based on the model developed by Husserl and further refined by Moustakas (1994). In this method, the researcher identified the essence of the human experiences of a phenomenon through the descriptions provided by the participants in the study. The method involved face-to-face in-depth interviews with a small number of subjects utilizing extensive interactions to formulate patterns and relationship meanings. The choice of this method was guided by the research question: How do male teachers describe their experience of teaching young children in a primary/elementary school environment? This research utilized in-depth interviews of participants and was consistent with the five characteristics by Moustakas (1994):

1. It seeks to reveal more fully the essences and meanings of human experience;

2. It seeks to uncover the qualitative rather than quantitative factors in behavior and experience;
3. It engages the total self of the research participant, and sustains personal and passionate involvement;
4. It does not seek to predict or to determine causal relationships;
5. It is illuminated through careful, comprehensive descriptions, vivid and accurate renderings of the experience, rather than measurements, ratings or scores. (p. 105)

Phenomenological studies include a focus on the “essence or structure of an experience” (Merriam, 2002, p. 6). The understanding of the essences marks phenomenology not only as a philosophy, but also as a research method (Creswell, 2003). Phenomenology involved the study of a relatively small number of participants who had experienced the phenomenon, usually between 5-25 individuals (Creswell, 2007).

Phenomenological psychological research aims to bring clarity and present situations lived by persons in daily life (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2007). Phenomenological research does not try to distill phenomena to a convenient number of identifiable variables and control the content in which the phenomena are studied; rather phenomenology is situated in a paradigm that is nonhierarchical, holistic, and nonjudgmental. What most methods call “subjects” are re-designated in phenomenology as “participants.” Phenomenological research is holistic in that it does not attempt to artificially separate the participants into components of mind, body, spirit; rather it views “that self and world are inseparable components of meaning” (Moustakas, 1994, p.28).

The intent of phenomenological research is to reveal the meanings in everyday existence. The aim of phenomenology was the fulfillment of human nature in an effort to become more fully aware of whom people are (Van Manen, 1990). The main goal of a phenomenological study was to understand a phenomenon from the perspective of people experiencing it, in order to understand more about the phenomenon. The phenomenological study was an effort to help other people in the same or similar situation (Creswell, 2007). The essence of phenomenology deals with the data of experience and their meaning for the experiencing individual.

### **Summary and Transition**

The shortage of information in the literature on the day to day experience of the male primary/elementary teacher was not surprising considering the small number of male primary/elementary teachers in the local and the global areas. This shortage made it promising to explore the lived experiences of male primary/elementary teachers. The literature review in this phenomenological study included sources from reputable organizations and current peer-reviewed literature related to male primary/elementary teachers and their decreasing numbers. Although the study of male primary/elementary teacher numbers gained more attention, much remains to be discovered from this qualitative phenomenological approach to research.

The findings from this study might be used to inform teacher training programs; these training programs are necessary to recruit and retain male teachers for elementary schools. Recruiting and retaining highly motivated male elementary educators might transform the environment of many elementary schools. The literature supported the idea

that male elementary teachers were in short supply globally and in many local districts (Amrein-Beardsley, 2007; Friedman, 2010; Halpern, 2010; Janairo, Holm, Jordan, & Wright, 2010).

In this study, male elementary teachers were interviewed in order to understand their lived experiences in the elementary school environment. Examining their experiences might give insight into areas where male elementary teachers need additional support, and it might give prospective male teachers a clearer picture of what they can expect in the classroom on a day to day basis. The research methodology explained in Section 3 detailed how the data was captured and applied in this study.

### Section 3: Research Method

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore and better understand the lived experience of being a male teacher in a primary/elementary school today; it examined components that may have contributed to the essence of the experience. The intent of this study was to conduct in-depth, open-ended individual interviews with a group of male elementary teachers from three school systems, two small and one large in the same southeastern state. The individual interviews allowed the researcher to identify the essence of the experience of the phenomenon of being a male teacher in an urban, suburban or rural elementary classroom.

#### **Research Design**

Merriam (2002) described qualitative research as a “powerful tool for learning more about our lives and the sociohistorical context in which we live” (p. xv). Qualitative research encompasses several different research designs including phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, and narrative analysis. The qualitative design that was chosen and most suited for this study was the phenomenological design.

#### **Phenomenological Research**

The phenomenological research design chosen for this study was based on the works of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) a proponent of phenomenological design. Husserl (2002) advocated a transcendental phenomenology which in general denotes how different individuals may experience the same event.

The phenomenological investigation focused on the long interview as the data collection tool (Moustakas 1994, p. 114). It allowed the researcher to establish a personal relationship with the participants. This is particularly important in the phenomenological investigation because the researcher asks a lot of each interviewee. Participation in such a study makes the participants co-researchers (Moustakas, 1994). Participants in the study must trust the researcher in order to share the most intimate details of their professional lives. The choice of this method was guided by the research question: How do male teachers describe their experience of teaching young children in a primary/ elementary school environment? It was an assumption that honest, detailed-rich narratives would be elicited from participants. The phenomenological inquiry was best suited for this study because the phenomenological investigation allowed the co-researchers to discuss what they had experienced in terms of the phenomenon and what context or situations had affected their experiences of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007, p. 61). Other qualitative research procedures such as narrative research, grounded theory, ethnographic, and case study did not lend themselves to describing the essence of the experience in the same manner (Creswell, 2007).

### **Ethnographic Research**

Ethnographic research focuses on an entire cultural group (Creswell, 2007). Ethnographic research was not deemed appropriate for this study because it was limited to one cultural group, and the phenomenological study could encompass several cultural groups. The researcher described and interpreted the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language of a sharing cultural group. It involves extensive



fieldwork that may be pursued in numerous social settings that allow for direct observations of the activities (Moustakas, 1994, p. 1). It involves both a process and a product; it focuses on human society and culture (Merriam, 2009).

### **Grounded Theory Research**

This research design, developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), initially focused on unraveling the elements of experience (Moustakas, 1994, p. 4). It required the researcher to generate a theory of a process, action, or interaction (Creswell, 2007, p. 63). A theory that emerged during the research process was generated directly from the data being collected. The goal of the present study was to examine the lived experiences of male elementary teachers, not to generate a theory about male elementary teachers. Thus, grounded theory was not considered appropriate for this study.

### **Narrative Research**

Narrative research focuses on exploring the life of an individual. Although it has some similarities to phenomenology, it was not considered for this study because it did not focus on the essence of the experience, but rather on the life of the individual. One of the keys to narrative research is the use of stories such as biography, life history, oral history, and autobiography (Merriam, 2009).

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided primarily by the research question: “What are the lived experiences of being a male elementary teacher?” In exploring this central research question, the male elementary teachers were asked to reflect on the following matters:

1. At what point in your life did you decide to become an elementary school teacher (Levinson, 1978)?
2. How has your decision to teach elementary children affected your life (Palmer, 2007)?
3. What factors influenced you to choose elementary teaching as a career (Mezirow, 2009)?

### **Ethical Considerations**

Moustakas (1994) contended that human science researchers were guided by the ethical principles on research with human participants. The researcher had an obligation to respect the rights, needs, values, and desires of participants (Creswell, 2003). Risk resulting from participation in the study was minimal. The study included addressing ethical considerations to protect the anonymity of participants. The use of pseudonyms obscured the real names of participants and places. Participants were asked to sign an informed consent form before they began participating in the research. They were free to withdraw at any time.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I explained the study to participants who were directly involved in it, and answered any questions related to the study. I served as the primary investigator and did not express personal bias or opinions of male elementary teachers throughout the research project. But, I have been exposed to male family members who were elementary teachers. My father served as principal of one of the schools where two of my participants worked. They did not know him. I never mentioned that the picture in the front lobby of the

school is a picture of my dad. The principal of the school was aware of this fact. I am not aware of any connection past or present to any of the possible research participants. I have not worked in an elementary school environment. However, I am a retired secondary educator from the large school district from which participants were interviewed. I took responsibility for establishing a researcher-participant relationship with each participant.

Establishing a researcher-participant relationship remains a vital part of any qualitative study (Hatch, 2002). The phenomenological design allowed the researcher to use observations and in-depth interviews to understand the range and complexity of each participant's life circumstances, experiences, and emotional framework (Brennan, 1998). Participants were the ultimate gatekeepers. They determined whether the researcher had access to the information desired. I took the time to explain what the study involved, and what was expected of participants before the study actually began.

### **Target Population**

The target population consisted of six of the 94 male primary/elementary teachers in three school districts, one large, and two small, in the same southeastern state. Those males selected for the study had at least one semester of teaching experience at the targeted level. All six of the targeted individuals had stories to tell about their lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). The teachers in the large district and one of the small districts taught grades K5 through fifth grade students. The teachers in one of the small rural districts taught grades K5 through grade 6. Only teachers who teach in grades K5 through grade 6 were considered. Fifty-five elementary schools in three districts with a

teacher population in excess of 1,940 teachers were considered in the study. A large majority of those teachers were eliminated because they were females. That left approximately 55 male elementary teachers. All teachers who actively participated in the study were asked to share their classroom experiences with the researcher.

### **Criteria for Selecting Participants**

Qualitative researchers look for participant involvement in data collection and seek to build rapport and credibility with the individuals in the study (Creswell, 2003). The interview functioned as an opportunity to reveal the meaning of structures participants use to organize their experiences and make sense of their worlds (Hatch, 2002). Purposeful, criterion sampling was used to select participants for this study (Creswell, 2009). The participants considered in this qualitative phenomenological study consisted of male elementary teachers from three school districts based on those male teachers who met the criteria of having at least one semester of teaching experience at the target level, and agreed to be interviewed. Researchers have differing opinions suggesting what constitutes a sufficient sample size. Moustakas (1994) listed general considerations including age, race, religion, ethnic, and cultural factors, gender, and political and economic factors that might be considered. He did not suggest a specific sample size. Creswell (1998) suggested five to 25. Morse (1994) suggested at least six interview participants, which is the number of participants selected for this study. Every effort was made to include a diverse group based on age, race, ethnic and cultural factors among the research participants (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Creswell (2007) described data collection as “a series of interrelated activities aimed at gathering good information to answer emerging research questions” (p. 118). Male elementary teachers from each of the three school districts involved were selected to interview. At least one personal interview was conducted with each participant as soon as IRB and other required approval was received. As the researcher, I was the primary data collection instrument for the study and conducted face-to-face in-depth interviews. Participants were asked to give permission to have their interviews audio-taped by the researcher. All audio tapes were transcribed verbatim at the end of the interviews. The data were subjected to a constant process of analysis to find common experiences and themes while assessing the overall experience of the participants.

Ninety-seven male elementary teachers were identified as possible participants for the study, of which age, diversity, and experience were unknown. Teachers were contacted based on principal recommendations. In order to insure a representatively diverse group, first preference was given to those who avoid duplicative age, ethnicity, and length of teaching experience requirements.

### **Data Analysis and Validity**

Moustakas (1994) described phenomenological research as an analysis of significant statements, the generation of meaning units, and the development of individual structural and textural descriptions as well as a description of the essence of experiencing the phenomenon. His modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of

analysis of phenomenological data was utilized to collect and analyze the data. This adaptation suggested a four step process:

1. Obtain a full description of the researcher's own experience of the phenomenon.
2. Researcher uses verbatim transcripts of the experience to complete a seven-step process.
  - a. Consider each statement with respect to significance for description of the experience.
  - b. Record all relevant statements.
  - c. List each nonrepetitive, non-overlapping statement. These are the invariant horizons or meaning units of the experience.
  - d. Relate and cluster the invariant meaning units into themes.
  - e. Synthesize the invariant meaning units and themes into a description of the textures of the experience. Include verbatim examples.
  - f. Reflect on your own textural description. Through imaginative variation, construct a description of the structures of the experience.
  - g. Construct a textural-structure description of the meaning and the essences of the experience.
3. Complete the seven-step process for each interviewee or co-researcher.
4. From the individual textural- structure descriptions of all co-researchers' experiences construct a composite meaning of the description of the meanings and essences of the experience, integrating all individual textural-structural

descriptions into a universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole. (p.122)

These steps in the data collection and analysis process helped to develop a composite portrayal of the essence of the experience representing the group, what it means for them to be male elementary school teachers. As I am neither a male, nor an elementary teacher, my exposure to the phenomenon varies greatly from the co-researchers which I interviewed. My exposure to the phenomenon is explained in greater detail in Section 5, the researcher's experience with the phenomenon.

All data analysis was based on the model. No computer program was used for analysis. I managed data by creating and organizing files for data; read through the text, made margin notes, and formed initial codes; described personal experience through epoche, and described the essence of the phenomenon; classified by developing significant statements which are listed in Appendix C, interpreted data by developing a textural description, and a structural description of how the phenomenon was experienced-developed the essence of the experience; and visualized the experience by presenting narration of the essence of the experience in tables, figures or discussion (Creswell, 2007).

The research design incorporates seven basic steps listed by Creswell (2003) for insuring validity and accuracy throughout the study as applicable:

- Triangulate different data sources of information by examining evidence from the sources and use it to build a coherent justification for themes.

- Use member-checking to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings through taking the final report or specific descriptions or themes back to participants and determined whether these participants felt that they were accurate.
- Use rich, thick descriptions to convey the findings.
- Clarify the bias the researcher brings to the study.
- Present negative or discrepant information that runs counter to the themes.
- Spend prolonged time in the field. In this way, the researcher develops an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study and could convey detail about the site and the people that lends credibility to the narrative account.
- Use peer debriefing to enhance the accuracy. (p.196)

The phenomenological method used in this study allowed for an in depth understanding of the lived male elementary teacher experience. As I was the primary instrument in data collection, bracketing, in which I set aside personal experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination was crucial to this study (Creswell, 2007).

Analysis of the data began once the interviews were transcribed using the methods and procedures of phenomenal analysis suggested by Moustakas (1994). The approach followed the general guideline of analyzing the data for significant phrases, developing meanings and clustering them into themes, and presenting an exhaustive description of the phenomenon.



### **Summary and Transition**

The research method chosen for this study was phenomenological investigation because the topic and question of the research had both social meaning and personal significance. This study did yield valuable information to educators concerning the challenges faced by male teachers in an elementary school environment. Awareness and understanding of some specific challenges encountered by male elementary teachers might facilitate effective communication among all stakeholders, including prospective teachers, involved in making decisions about the education of young children. The fourth section presented the analysis and interpretation of data. This section focused mainly on emerging themes for individual participants as well as for the whole group.

## Section 4: Results

### **Introduction**

This phenomenological study was conducted to better understand and define the lived experience of male teachers in an elementary school setting. Phenomenology was selected as the research design because it focuses on describing the essence of a phenomenon from the perspectives of those who have experienced it (Merriam & Associates, 2002). This research design allowed me to take rich in-depth descriptions of the male elementary teachers' experiences and challenges and synthesize them into common themes that described the experiences of selected male elementary teachers in their school setting. This is consistent with Moustakas (1994), that general or universal meanings are derived from individuals who have lived the experiences and can give their own personal and comprehensive descriptions of their experiences. A phenomenological approach was utilized for this research because it was important to get firsthand knowledge directly from the male elementary teachers involved in the study.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to better define the experiences of male teachers in a primary/elementary school setting. Male elementary teachers from three different school districts were interviewed for this study; teachers from one large district and two smaller districts were contacted to participate in the study after system approval and IRB approval (# 07-16-13-0125868) were given. Of the eight principals that were contacted, one no longer had any male elementary teachers on her faculty, and one principal was unavailable because of medical reasons. The remaining six principals shared email addresses for their male teachers. Of the 10 teachers that were contacted

initially, three responded positively, and the other seven did not respond. Another email was sent to the non-responding teachers. This time, three additional teachers responded. I sent each prospective participant an informed consent document and proceeded to schedule interviews with the responding teachers.

### **Data Collection and Analysis Process**

Person-to-person interviews were conducted with each of the six respondents after the Informed Consent e-mail was received from individual participants. Each interview was audio recorded using a digital recorder. The recorded interviews were sent to a transcriptionist who transcribed the audio recordings and sent the written transcript to the researcher. After reviewing each transcript, I prepared a spread sheet of codes, meaning units or significant statements and finally emerging themes. The transcripts were forwarded to the individual participants for verification, known as member checking. Each participant, his principal and superintendent, or the executive director of research, assessment, grants, and accountability for the system was told that a copy of the findings would be provided to them once the research was complete.

Data were analyzed based on Moustakas's modifications. He developed modifications based on two methods of analysis of phenomenological data: van Kaam's (1959, 1966) method and the Stevick (1971), Colaizzi (1973), and Keen's (1975) method of analysis of data. I chose the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen modification, which suggested a four step process (outlined in Section 3, p. 45 of this document), which begins with the researcher applying the same analytical process to her experience with the phenomenon

that each participant's analysis was subjected to once a verbatim transcript of her experience with the phenomenon was prepared.

### **Findings**

The problem of this study was that few males chose primary/elementary teaching as a career choice. This has resulted in very few male elementary teachers in most school systems. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to better understand and define the male elementary teacher experience. The voice of selected male elementary teachers was heard as they discussed what it was like to be a male teacher in a primary/elementary classroom, and determined the key factors that may have influenced the experience.

### **Textural and Structural Descriptions**

Following Moustakas's (1994) modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method for analyzing phenomenological data, the significant statements (Appendix C) and themes were used to write a description of what the participants experienced; this description is referred to as a textural description. The significant statements and themes were also used to write a description of the context or setting that influenced how participants experience the phenomena, this he called structural description (Creswell, 2007).

**Textural description co-researcher 1.** The experience of teaching elementary students for CR1 is rewarding. Exposure to children who are curious and eager to learn is an enjoyable experience for him. The children are still eager to please the adults in their lives. They are at a point where they are about to experience a big change, going into middle school. He loves that he is one of the people that gets to prepare them for the next

phase of their life. He very much enjoys being in that position. He does not think of himself so much as a “male” role model for so many children who do not have a male role model in their lives. He has played an “interesting role ... of surrogate father for a little while.” He loves when he can share experiences with his students.

**Structural description.** CR1 came to elementary teaching after working various jobs for several years before he realized that teaching was what he really wanted to do. When he was eventually hired as an elementary teacher, everything seemed to fit in place. He knows that he fills a need in the lives of many of his students. He tries to make sure his children (students) have a positive experience because he remembers the experience of being in elementary school, not the content of what he was taught, but the experience itself.

**Textural description co-researcher 2.** CR2 described his first grade classroom as fun because he is where he wants to be, doing something he finds rewarding. He knows that he is a role model because his students watch and listen to everything he says and does. Some of them may not have a “role model that’s a male ... some of them do.” Having a chance to be a role model for all of his students has been “rewarding for me as a first grade teacher.”

**Structural description.** CR2 always knew he wanted to teach. He ended-up in elementary teaching on advice from one of his coaches after he realized that his schedule would not permit him to complete the labs he needed to be biology major. This is his passion; he loves his roles as teacher, mentor, role model, and significant male in their young lives.

**Textural description co-researcher 3.** Rewarding is the first word used by CR3 to explain his male elementary teaching experience. He expresses needing a great deal of patience, and he has been blessed with patience and caring. He likes to portray himself as a mentor as well as a teacher. He wants to be someone his students can look up to. He is aware that many of his students may not have “that fatherly figure” at home.

**Structural description.** The small rural community in which CR3 works is the same community in which he grew-up. He knows the needs because he is part of the community. Moving from the high school to the elementary school was an easy move for him because he focused on the students and their needs. He knew he was needed there after the previous math teacher left. He satisfies a dual role in the school as math teacher and male mentor/role model for the elementary students at his school.

**Textural description co-researcher 4.** Exciting and challenging are the first two words used by CR4 to describe his classroom experience. He loves to see his students’ joy as their reading test scores show improvement. He is aware that as a male teacher in an elementary school he has an impact and an influence that many of his female coworkers do not have. He and some of his male coworkers organized a Boys Group and a Garden Club geared toward male students in grades 3-5.

**Structural description.** CR4 puts his whole heart into working with his elementary students. He has set a good example for them; he has encouraged many of the males to get involved in wholesome activities that some of the teachers spearhead. He has tried to set an example for all of his students although many of the efforts are geared toward males. There are fewer examples of strong male leadership in many of their

homes and in their community. He works hard with several of his male co-workers to provide alternatives to the students.

**Textural description co-researcher 5.** Having children of his own added to CR5's enjoyment of teaching elementary school children. He loves to see his students grow and mature. He is fortunate enough to work with the high school basketball and football teams as well. He felt a need to come into the elementary school because he knew what it was like not to have a father figure around as he grew up. As a result he wanted to be "kind of a role model to them [kids]." He wanted to show the kids that he cared about them.

**Structural description.** CR 5 came to elementary teaching to make a difference in the lives of many of his students who did not have a positive male role model at home. He transformed his negative life experiences into positive classroom experiences for his students.

**Textural description co-researcher 6.** CR6's experience of teaching physical education to elementary students is exciting because, "You never know what to expect." As a young teacher and a young man, he had to develop discipline guidelines that would work for him and his students. He feels that the elementary school is the point where students are being groomed for their future, and that's very important to him. He has the opportunity to play a very important role in their lives.

**Structural description co-researcher 6.** The Black Belt community in which CR6 works has very few male elementary teachers. He knows that his attitude and the

excitement he displays about his job can be positive for him and his students because he is totally engaged in working with them. He wants to reach them all in positive ways.

### **The Lived Experiences of Six Male Elementary Teachers**

**Co-researcher (CR) 1.** CR1 is a fifth grade teacher with 5 years of teaching experience. He is very dedicated to his students; he takes pride in the fact that he works with approximately 60 kids each day, teaching them math and science, directly preparing them for middle school and indirectly preparing them for the rest of their lives. His students are “very curious, very eager to learn, and to please the adults in their lives.” He explained the most inspiring thing about his job in this way: “the inspirational parts would be those moments when the children are really excited and engaged in the activities that I’ve put together for them, when the learning is really taking place. That is probably the most exciting part of my day.”

He is encouraged when students come back to talk to let him know how much it meant to them to be in his class. He loved the idea that, “I could make a positive difference in the lives of children.”

“I want my children to have a positive experience. My hope is that it will carry over when they get into middle school, because those are just very challenging years for kids,” explained CR1. He, like Palmer (2007), is hopeful about who his students are. Palmer spoke of this as a dance—connecting, teaching, and reaching—with his students. CR1 is connecting with his students, just on a different level.



CR1 is usually the first male teacher that any of his students had; he is able to talk with them and motivate them. He feels that “children at this age are still interested in pleasing the teacher, male or female.” He talks about being a male elementary teacher:

Maybe I’m helping motivate kids that haven’t been particularly motivated in the past, or maybe just because I am a male I am able to talk to them in a little bit different of a way and have conversations with boys that maybe the female teachers couldn’t have with them—just to try to get them motivated.

After working various jobs for several years, CR1 realized that, “Teaching is what I really needed to do.” He was not satisfied with what he was doing previously; everything else was just a job. He wanted a career. “I wanted something that I felt passionate about, that meant something to me; that made me feel that I was contributing in some way.” Teaching young children was the career he chose.

CR1 spoke of being a positive role model for the kids:

I didn’t really think about the role so much as a male role model for so many children that either don’t have a male role model in their lives; or maybe their father had passed away or we have a lot of military kids; and so we have a lot of parents where the fathers are gone; so that’s been an interesting role that I have played – where I’ve kind of been the surrogate father for a little while.

“At any grade level, when you step into teaching, there’s going to be a lot of scrutiny, but even more so, I think, at the elementary level.” CR1 gave voice to Palmer’s (2007) ideas of the intellectual (the way one thinks about teaching and learning), and the emotional (the way one feels as one teaches and learns) experience of teaching.

**Co-researcher 2.** CR2 is a first grade teacher who is beginning his fifth year of teaching first grade. He described teaching as fun because it is what he wants to do. He realizes the tremendous impact he has on the lives of his young students. He is compelled to work harder when he sees that his students are listening to him. When the children learn and improve, that keeps him, “Encouraged to teach.”

CR2 believes that his best asset as a teacher is “building relationships with the students.” He continues to describe that relationship, “You want to also be there—to a certain extent—as someone they can, they know they can depend on—someone they know they can come to.”

Like many new teachers, he was unsure of what to do and which direction to go. “All I knew was I better start teaching and start helping these kids. But then as you go on and you learn their problems, you learn their strengths, you learn their weaknesses and you start working with them.” This encouraged him to work even harder.

He reflected on being a role model:

Everything you say, they listen and you have the chance to really, really impact their lives with your teaching; also with being a role model for them, you know. Even with some of them, they may not have a role model that’s a male in their lives; some of them do, but not all of them and you have the chance to be that role model for them, and that’s been rewarding for me as a first grade teacher.

One of the most challenging parts for him is, “dealing with the children that don’t have what you would call, a strong household. ...not only do you have to teach them,

and do your job, but sometimes you have to do a little more.” He experiences numerous challenges, but his joy and inspiration to teach are unshaken. He knows that:

There are not very many male elementary teachers. So being in that position, I realize that I have the chance to really impact the student; and by me being a male – even if they do have a male at home – they love to have a male as a teacher; even some of the female students – the girls, some of them – they love it. And being a male teacher, you have a big opportunity to be a big impact on their lives, you know; especially being young and at my age.

This co-researcher seems to be comfortable in his position as a teacher to his first grade students. He accepts challenges as they come and tries to work through them for the benefit of his students. His experience as a first grade teacher has helped prepare him for future classroom challenges.

**Co-researcher 3.** CR3 had a unique teaching experience in that he taught math to middle and high school students for 9 years before choosing to teach elementary students. He is beginning his second year teaching in the elementary school; previously, he taught middle and high school math for 9 years. He feels that as a male elementary teacher, he has a positive impact especially with male students. He expressed it this way,

Coming from a small rural community like we are, a lot of these kids may not have, you know, that fatherly figure to look at. So that’s kind of how I portray myself, as well, as not just being a teacher but also a mentor and someone that they can look up to and, have aspirations of doing good things in life and being successful citizens and productive citizens.

He feels that many of the children have “a pre-conceived notion about their future by just their environment that they have been raised in.”

Many of the students feel they have no choice about their future, “You know my grandfather was a logger, and my daddy was a logger, so that’s what I’m gonna be, is a logger.”

CR3 tried to fill the void and get over to them that,

No, you don’t have to be that. Your future is not already destined for you. If you’re successful at your academics, then, you know, you don’t have to be the same thing that your father or your grandfather or your uncle was, you know. You can, you know, essentially be whatever, you know, your goal is.

He shows them by his life choices that they have the opportunity to set their own course in life. They know that he started out as a high school math teacher, then chose to teach math at the elementary level, an uncommon occurrence especially for a male. He shows them by his life example that they may choose elementary teaching like he did or they may choose any other career that interests them.

You don’t necessarily have to have the stigma of a bookworm. You can still be cool and smart if that’s the way you want to look at it then. So that’s how I think I have a positive impact on the males. The females, I find it more of a struggle with them, at times. A lot of them, I think, resent males and because of their, you know, previous experiences with males. So I find it more difficult with them and trying to get over that barrier, that, one-on-one barrier first, so we can dive into the academic aspect of it.

He is inspired by the kids to be the best teacher he can be for them. He described teaching as rewarding. He believed that anyone dealing with children must have a great deal of patience, and “I think that’s just a virtue that’s being put on us by some other higher being.” This was his spiritual connection to teaching that Palmer (2007) calls, “the diverse ways we answer the heart’s longing to be connected with the largeness of life—a longing that animates love and work, especially the work called teaching.” (p. 5)

CR3 has strong advice for any male contemplating teaching at the elementary level, “I would tell them to make sure they have on their ‘elementary hat’ each and every day, because that’s what I’ve found to be the biggest struggle. If you’re not at their level, then you’ll lose them, you will quickly lose them.” A male teacher standing over a child might be a bit intimidating, so he suggests sitting beside them or sitting at their level, not towering over them. CR3 wants to reach all of his students; he does not wish to lose any of them.

**Co-researcher 4.** CR4 finds teaching exciting and challenging. He is a fifth grade teacher who has been teaching for at least ten years. He is concerned that in that time, “We have switched books so much; I find myself ...being trained on, you know, how the program works.” His frustration level is high, but he is still focused on his students and their achievements, needs and successes.

“Some kids, I get them [reading] at ‘4.something’ you know, reading at fourth grade level; and when they leave here – I had one student, I think he was at about ‘9 .something.’” CR4 is quite proud of the gains his students made. “Those gains make me feel like, you know, well, at least I did something.”

He tries to be a positive influence on his students; he knows that many of them came from single parent homes with just a mom. He is the first male teacher that many of his students have had. He says that many of the students “still call me ‘Ma’am’ sometimes, you know because they are so used to it.” They are accustomed to having a female teacher. He reflects on his role as a male teacher.

I think even appearance-wise or, you know, just talking to them (male students), you know, you are a male...But I do have some boys, you know, they just refuse (to listen) because I don’t know if because his mom at home or whatever, but they just refuse to follow, you know. But if you try to talk to them (tell them), “You are a male; you are going to grow up to be like me, you know... Try to pull up your pants. ...Look at me – have you ever seen my shirt outside, my shirt untucked? .... Even when I’m on the street, my shirt is always, it’s always tucked.

CR4 and his male coworkers started a group which was open to male students in grades 3-5; they wanted to set an example for the male students at the school. Every Thursday all the men at his school would wear a necktie, make sure their shirts were tucked-in and look nice. They tried to target those boys that had “behavior problems, the ones that want to pull their pants down, the ones that want to do that street (thing), you know walk, talk and everything.” At that time there were at least five male teachers (in the school) including the PE coach, all of them participated. They worked with 20 to 21 boys: “We’d target those, we think, they were not too much exposed to male figures at home.”

We were guys and, you know, we were trying to help them out; take them places like to basketball (games), you know, when they had basket- high school play, we used to, she (the principal) would get a bus for us, we'd take them to those places, you know.

CR4 continue, "They'd take pictures. If there were functions near the school, we used those guys to be ushers, to run errands. Even if we knew they were not good, they were not (always) behaving well." The male teachers wanted to reward the young men and encourage them to improve their behavior.

Many of the students in CR4's school come from single parent (mom only) homes so "they need to see more of us, you know, at school." He feels that for girls there are enough women to direct them, to do their hair, etc. The boys often do not necessarily have the kind of support they need unless there are men to provide it.

The best thing about being an elementary teacher for CR4 is the opportunity to "educate them [students]. You know, the opportunity to guide young kids to a right direction. It does not start in high school or middle school for them to be lost. We are the first people to see this child, if somebody doesn't get him, he'll be lost."

**Co-researcher 5.** CR5 is beginning his 12<sup>th</sup> year as a 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher at his school. He loves to see the kids grow from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. One of his biggest joys is that he is fortunate enough to work with the high school basketball and football teams. He says, "It is a big joy to see those kids grow from fifth grade all the way to juniors and seniors in high school and see those kids graduate. Being there throughout their whole life is almost being like a father to them."

Teaching has been exactly what he expected when it comes to the kids. “It’s a joy to get up, just to come and be their teacher.” He explains, “The biggest reason I chose to come into the elementary school was because my father wasn’t around.” CR5 knew how it felt to have a father figure around, and then not to have one around. He chose the elementary school so he could be a role model for kids who had a similar experience, and for those who never had a father figure in their lives.

He explains, “So my thing was to go into the elementary school, where these young kids are, and try to be kind of a role model to them because in the black belt area, in this area, a lot of kids come from single parent homes, with just mothers.”

He was the only male teacher in the school for more than ten years; a new physical education teacher is beginning his second year in the school. CR5 explains, “You can see the reaction when they (students) come into the classroom. It seems like they don’t even know how to handle a male, even how to relate to me, because they never had that at home.

He expressed that,

You always have to show these kids that you care about them, and anytime you show a kid that you care about him, I mean it’s not hard to be in a relationship with him. And not only with the boys – the girls are the same way. And you have to tell the girls sometimes that, ‘you can’t hug me like that,’ because the girls are the same way. They come up to me and want to hug you sometimes too.

CR5’s passion for the job was quite evident. He thinks more good men are needed in the elementary setting, more good male role models.



**Co-researcher 6.** CR6 was the youngest in age and experience of the male teachers that were interviewed for the study. He was beginning his second year as a physical education teacher to students in kindergarten through sixth grade. He explained why he chose elementary teaching. “I wanted to be that figure [role model] where the children can look up to me and kind of take ways, like we were talking about earlier, like a healthy lifestyle or being disciplined.” He believed that those traits carry lifelong.

He felt that, “there’s a right way to do everything. I chose elementary school because they’re being groomed at this point; I’m not saying they’re not being groomed in middle school, but elementary is where it starts.” He helps to prepare his students for an active lifestyle by teaching them the fundamentals of several different sports such as tennis, soccer and Putt-Putt golf among others.

### **Themes**

Four themes emerged as a result of interviews with six male elementary teachers from three different school districts. All four of the themes occurred with at least two of the interviewees. Three themes were evident with at least four of the interviewees. Two themes occurred with at least two of the interviewees. The themes which emerged during the interviews were: male role modeling, readying students, establishing mentoring relationships, and mattering.

**Male role modeling.** All of the teachers in this study have direct experience with male role modeling. This gives them a perspective that only a male can bring to the elementary classroom experience because a male elementary teacher knows what it is like

to be a young male and have questions and concerns that only a caring male can answer. Several of the co-researchers reflected on various aspects of this unique experience.

CR1 reflected on the role he has played when he says, “just because I am a male I am able to talk to them in a little bit different of a way and have conversations with boys that maybe the female teachers couldn’t have with them.”

He also reflected on male role modeling when he shared, “that’s been an interesting role that I have played—where I’ve kind of been the surrogate father for a little while.” He is quite aware of his roles in the elementary classroom.

CR2 knows that some of his first grade students, “may not have a role model that’s a male in their lives; some of them do, but not all of them, and you have the chance to be that role model for them.”

He knows that, “being a male teacher – you have a big opportunity to be a big impact on their lives.” CR2 enjoys the role he plays in the lives of his first grade students.

In the small rural community where CR3 lives and works, “everyone knows everyone.” CR3 knows which students have male role models at home and which do not. He portrays himself not just as a teacher, but also as a “mentor and someone that they can look up to and ... have aspirations of doing good things in life.” CR3 is comfortable with his role in the school and his role in the community in which he lives. He continues to make a difference in the lives of his students.

CR4 has had great success with male role modeling in his school environment. He and his fellow male teachers have provided ample opportunities for troubled males within

their school to have positive experiences within the community. They spend time inside and outside school hours with some of their troubled male students.

For 10 years, CR5 was the only male teacher in his school. He felt compelled to, “be kind of a role model to them (the elementary students in his school), because in the black belt area, it’s a lot of kids that come from single parent (just mothers) homes.” He feels that he always has to show the kids that he cares about them.

CR6 spoke about role modeling in this way,

I wanted to be that figure where the children can look up to me and kind of take ways, like we were talking about earlier, like a healthy lifestyle or being disciplined, because being disciplined carries all of their life.

He feels that one of his assets is empathy; he can sit and talk with his students and find out what causes them to act in unacceptable ways.

**Readying students.** Readyng students might include preparing them for the next test, the next grade level or other future occurrences that will impact their lives. For some male elementary teachers that concept also includes readyng students by exhibiting appropriate behaviors for students who do not have a positive male other than their teacher in their lives. These concepts were embraced by each of the six teachers in some manner. While each did not use that terminology, the concept was evident in much of what they said.

CR1 was most direct when he said:

They’re [the children] are at a point where there’s about to be a big change, going into middle school. So I get to be the person, or one of the people, that helps

prepare them for the next phase of their life; and I very much enjoy being in that position.

He is just where he wants to be doing just what he wants to do:

I think that doing the team teaching like we do in fifth grade gets them in that, mode where they're used to changing classes; and so I think it helps them in terms of their organizational skills, having to be prepared and have their things ready to go from one class to another.

Without consciously thinking about it, teachers ready or prepare students for so many things that will happen in their lives.

CR1 never focused directly on readying some of his students for their future as responsible young men. He didn't really think about "the role so much as a 'male' role model for so many children that ... don't have a male role model in their lives." He knows that he is readying them for many things, and many tomorrows.

CR2 said it this way, "They need help, not just with their work; they need help with their whole life." He knows that he is readying or preparing students not just for 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, but for everything that will impact their life.

"You've got eighteen or 19 6-year-olds that stare you in the face and you have to teach them how to read, how to count, how to do math; and you see that it can be very challenging."

"You can look at some of the things that they love and you can encourage them."

CR 2 said he has an "opportunity to do just something that will make their (*the children's*) life even better than it is today if you encourage little children to be whatever

they want to be.” The impact that each teacher has on his students varies based on the teacher.

CR3 readies his students for life using positive reinforcements. He reminds them that,

You don't have to be that [a logger]. Your future is not already destined for you. If you're successful at your academics, then, you know, you don't have to be the same thing that your father or your grandfather or your uncle was, you know. You can, you know, essentially be whatever your goal is.

“So you don't necessarily have to have a stigma of a bookworm or a, you know. You can still be cool and smart if that's you know, the way you want to look at it then.” This participant felt strongly about the opportunities afforded his students to choose a different life path from one already established. He is readying the boys to be responsible young men by the example he sets for them. He is also showing the girls how a responsible young man behaves.

CR4 took pride in gains made by his students.

Some kids I get them at '4.something' you know, reading at fourth grade level; and when they leave here – I had one student; I think he was at about '9.something.' I am really proud of them, you know; those gains make me feel like, you know, 'Well, at least I did something.'

CR4 is aware that he is readying many of his male students for more than middle school; he is readying them for life. He talks with them and shows them that, “You are a

male; you are going to grow up to be like me.” He encourages them to dress and act like the young men he hopes they want to be.

CR5 focused on getting the students ready for science because they were missing that exposure. He explained:

This is the first year that the kids actually had a science book, and this is their first year that they will have a test in science; so, there’s a lot of skills that they’re missing in science. It seems hard to them at first, but just to see them when they grasp a skill and you can see their face light up. (Co-researcher 5)

The joy in CR5’s voice is evident when he says, “It’s a joy when you’re going over a new skill and just makes you feel great inside.”

CR6 wanted to make sure his students did things the right way. “We teach sportsmanship, good sportsmanship, and things of that nature; and a positive attitude when it comes to sports.” He is concerned about what the students learn in his physical education class.

We have, we actually have a golf lesson plan; we teach them Putt-Putt golf. We have a badminton lesson plan, and tennis, and soccer. We try to keep them (*the students*) well rounded, and doing these lesson plans. We actually have to try to teach the sports to them so as they get older, they already know these things (*the rules*) when they move on to middle school.

Readying students for the present and the future seems to be a focus for each of the male elementary teachers that were interviewed. As a male, each of them is readying

their students by setting an example of appropriate behaviors that some of their students may not experience because of no other positive male in their life.

**Establishing Mentoring Relationships.** Levinson (1978), Mezirow (2000), and Palmer (2007) all emphasized the complexity and the importance of the mentoring relationship. Mezirow (2000) stated, “Our life histories and languages are bound up with those of others” (p. 115). This is one key to understanding transformative learning. Palmer stressed that, “the imprint of good teaching remains long after the facts they gave us have faded” (p.22). Each of the male teachers in this study had a mentor who helped him grow and develop. Mentoring relationships are important. According to Levinson, (1978), “The mentor relationship is one of the most complex, and developmentally important, a man can have in early adulthood” (p. 97). These relationships can make a difference in a student’s education. A mentor will feel some responsibility for the successful development of the student. Many mentors provide emotional and social support to students because they received mentoring support as they grew and developed.

CR6 wanted to set a good example like his mentor/coach did for him. This made a big difference in his life. He described what he learned from that experience.

“Growing up, I always looked up to my coaches and took everything they said to heart and tried to do what they said.” He wanted to be the same figure for his students, “a healthy lifestyle or being disciplined, because being disciplined carries all their life.”

His mentor was his high school coach who worked his way up from an elementary school coach, to high school and now college coaching. This young man hopes to follow that same path. This young educator knew what he wanted to

accomplish; he seemed quite focused on his goals. Having a strong mentor during his developmental years caused CR6 to see this need among his students. He wants to be that mentor for them. As a young male teacher in a school and community with numerous female headed homes, he has an opportunity to make a difference in the lives of many of his students.

CR5 chose elementary teaching so that he could make a difference in the lives of his students. "I chose to come into the elementary school because my father wasn't around. So my thing was to go into the elementary school where these young kids are, and try to be kind of a role model to them." He explained that in his area, in the black belt area, there are many students who come from single parent homes with just a mother. His longevity in the school in which he works is an asset; it has made him well aware of the make-up of the community in which he works.

CR4 spoke of how all the male teachers, about five of them, banded together to make a difference in the lives of some of their most troubled male students. They started a boys group which met once a week. All the male teachers including the physical education teacher wore a necktie on meeting days. They targeted problem boys in grades 3 to 5.

"We were trying to help them out; take them places like to high school basketball games." The principal arranged for a bus to transport the children and teachers. If there were other functions near the school, those students were used as ushers or to run errands. Even kids who were not so good were allowed to participate.



“We’d target those [boys] that were not too much exposed to male figures at home. It really did [make a difference] behavior-wise.” It was uncertain if the boys group would be functional in the school this school term.

CR3 knows the impact of growing up and living in a small, rural community. He sees himself as a mentor. “That’s kind of how I portray myself, as well, as not just being a teacher, but also a mentor and someone that they can look up to, you know, have aspirations of doing good things in life and being successful citizens and productive citizens; so that’s kind of where my reward and my gratitude comes in.”

He reflected on mentors in his life that he still goes to for advice, and for direction about things. “I can look at mentors and their career of thirty and forth plus years and that gives me hope. I can strive through it and I can make a difference in these kids’ lives because, you know, these same mentors made a difference in my life.” Since mentors made a tremendous difference in CR3’s life; he is determined to reciprocate that action for his students.

CR2 enjoys mentoring his young students. He is determined to be a positive mentor for them, because so many do not have a positive male in their lives. He knows that, “They need help, not just with their work; they need help with their whole life.” He knows that as a male he is a big impact on their whole lives. In some instances, “They may not have a role model that’s a male in their lives. You have the chance to be that role model for them, and that’s been rewarding for me as a first grade teacher.”

“It’s not as easy as it sounds.” The roles overlap because, “You might be teaching them how to write, but then you realize that they don’t really know how to hold a pencil.”

CR1 did not anticipate some of the “challenges that these children at such a young age experienced.” He wanted to be a positive role model for them, but, “I didn’t really think about the role so much as a ‘male’ role model for so many children that either don’t have a male role model in their lives.” Many of them have fathers who are not there, for a variety of reasons.

“I’ve kind of been the surrogate father for a little while. But I think that I still find that I’m just as interested to learn new things and just as fascinated by some things as the kids are, and I love that. We can share that experience together.”

**Mattering Concerns.** Mattering can be a powerful driving influence when a learner feels affirmed (Raspberry as cited in Olson, 2006). Mattering needs to be local and it needs to be reciprocal. Mattering results in actions which show how important you are to others, and how much others pay attention to you (Peterson, 2009). Elementary students may discover that some teachers are patient, respectful, and concerned about them as a learner. They may experience feelings of acceptance and the caring support, and the encouragement they need to progress (Olson, 2006).

Each of the co-researchers spoke in some way about mattering, how they showed their students that they (the students) were important to them. CR1 explained that he could remember being in fifth grade, himself, “I think that what I remember is not the content that I was taught; I remember how I was treated.” Mattering tells us how important we are to others based on how we are treated. CR1 wanted his students to have a “positive experience,” and know that they matter.

CR2 admitted that it was a “big scare” for him when he was assigned to teach first graders. However, he wanted his students to know that he was there for them. He was, “someone that cared for them.” He was “nurturing to them, and paid attention to them.” They were important to him; they matter.

CR3 knew that he had to have a “great deal of patience,” when working with his students. He emphasized a strong concern and respect for his students, “we’re not working with machines that you can just cut on and off at any time; we’re working with real human beings.” He is patient, respectful, and concerned about his students as people and as learners. This affirmation of them is a powerful driving force for the learner according to Olson (2006).

CR4 focused on the positive, he showed that he was concerned when his students were careless with their appearance. He would quietly tell them, “You’re a male and you can do better than this. You’re not going to fix cars; you’re coming to school. You have to be clean.” He did not just want to educate them “book-wise,” but “life-wise” as well.

CR5 emphasized the spiritual aspect by saying, “I always put God first in everything I do.” He believes that, “You always have to show these kids that you care about them.” They need to know that they matter.

### **The Essence of the Experience**

The male teacher experience is rare in many elementary schools because there are so few male elementary teachers. Many of these teachers were driven by personal experiences which caused them to choose elementary teaching. The teachers provide a rare example of male leadership among elementary teachers that some elementary

students never experience. The male teachers that I interviewed readily admitted that their female coworkers are just as dedicated and concerned about their students as they are.

However, male elementary teachers can offer disposition, attitude and emotions that differ from the same traits offered by female elementary school teachers. Male elementary teachers have the ability to impact their students with the outlook, approach, and feelings they bring to the classroom. A positive male presence in an elementary classroom can be invaluable.

There is a unique shared understanding among male elementary teachers that makes their experiences distinctive (Sargent, 2000). They are rare male role models in their elementary schools. My co-researchers love their jobs. They know that they are frequently the only one of their gender teaching in their school. That added a tremendous amount of pressure to the individual, but love of job surpassed everything else.

### **Epoche**

I have been closely associated with male elementary teachers most of my life. The first was my dad, then teachers on his staff once he became a principal. My oldest brother also chose elementary teaching, and a few of my male friends and acquaintances were elementary teachers. All of them seemed to enjoy teaching and mentoring their young students.

From an educator's perspective, my experience with male elementary teachers has been somewhat limited; my limited experience has been quite positive and encouraging. This makes me believe that many male elementary teachers focus on their students and

the student's connection to learning. In addition male teachers bring a diverse perspective to the elementary classroom.

### **Discrepant Cases and Nonconforming Data**

Based on the six male elementary teachers that I interviewed, there was at least one discrepant case of nonconforming data dealing with ethical challenges. Male elementary teachers in particular must sometimes be careful with the contact they have with their female students because some behaviors can be misinterpreted. CR5 reminded some of his female students, "You can't hug me like that." His response was a result of young female students who wanted to hug him when he showed concern for them. He knows that physical contact such as hugging female students might be misunderstood.

This same co-researcher faced another ethical dilemma when a school administrator attempted to coerce him into changing the grade of one of his young students. After repeated evaluations from several other school administrators, and a state academic consultant and evaluator, the teacher was vindicated. The grade the student received was the grade he had earned. No other co-researcher indicated a problem with ethical issues.

The voice of the research participants prevailed in this study. They spoke of their teaching experiences based on the questions that I asked them. The open-ended questions which were asked allowed each participant to respond in his own manner. I maintained an open-ended and exploratory approach when asking questions.

### **Evidence of Data Quality**

Throughout this study, it was important that I set aside my personal beliefs and judgments about male elementary teachers to ensure that my own preconceptions and personal biases did not skew the information I gathered from my co-researchers. I used epoche or bracketing to set aside my personal experiences as much as possible. Before and after each interview, I used personal quiet reflecting time to center myself and record (in my personal journal) my thoughts and reflections about each interview. I also used member checks, where each individual participant reviewed a transcript for accuracy.

### **Summary and Transition**

Section 4 reported on the results regarding the male elementary teacher experience. Interview questions were used to generate data. In-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with six male primary/elementary teachers from three different school districts to gather data. Four prominent themes emerged from individual narratives: male role modeling, readying students, establishing mentoring relationships, and mattering concerns. Section 5 presents interpretation of findings, implications for social change, recommendations for action and recommendations for further study. It concludes with a reflection on the researcher's exposure to male elementary teachers.

## Section 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### Overview

The experience of male teachers in the elementary classroom is not well documented from the male teacher's point of view. The purpose of this study was to understand and define the male teacher experience in the elementary school setting. As a minority population in most school systems and in countless schools, male elementary teachers have unique experiences. Researchers have written about the inadequate number of male elementary teachers and some of the challenges of being a male teacher in an elementary school (Ashcraft & Servier, 2006; Cushman, 2007; Janario, Holm, Jordan, & Wright, 2010; Thornton & Bricheno, 2008; Washington, 2009). The purpose of this study was to better understand and describe the male teacher experience in the elementary school setting. The most appropriate voice in a phenomenological study would be the voice of those individuals involved in the phenomena, the male elementary teachers, themselves. Thus, six male teachers were interviewed from three different school districts in a southeastern state. Each had very strong feelings about his role as a teacher of primary/elementary children. The guiding research question was how do male teachers describe their experience of teaching young children in a primary/elementary school environment? Contributing questions were:

1. When did you decide to become an elementary teacher?
2. How has that decision changed your life?
3. What factors influenced you to choose elementary teaching as a career?

Four themes emerged from those interviews: male role modeling, readying students, establishing mentoring relationships, and mattering. Although the majority of the themes existed among all six of the interviewees, one or two of the themes stood out strongly with only two or three interviewees.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The four themes that emerged from the coding and clustering of the data offer a sketch of the male elementary teacher experience through the eyes of six male teachers with varying levels of experience of teaching young children. The study addressed the larger research question:

How do male teachers describe their experience of teaching young children in a primary/elementary school environment?

The theoretical outlooks of Levinson, Palmer, and Mezirow were employed also to describe the male teacher experience: At what point in your life did you decide to become an elementary teacher (Levinson, 1978)? How has your decision to teach elementary children changed your life (Palmer, 2007)? What factors influenced you to choose elementary teaching as a career (Mezirow, 2000, 2009)?

Co-researchers discussed the point at which they knew they wanted to become elementary teachers. For most, it was a first career choice. CR1 initially wanted to be a high school English teacher, but he accepted a job outside of education because of life circumstances, a disorientating dilemma. Later when he decided to come to teaching, he was encouraged to change to elementary teaching because the “English/Literature teacher is kind of a coveted job at the high schools,” and it would take him many years to get that



position. This transition proved to be appropriate for his life circumstances. He followed the advice and has loved his life changing job as an elementary school teacher. At the time, he had elementary aged children of his own; he realized that he could do pretty well with kids that age. For him, the decision to teach elementary children has been life altering and very satisfying.

Co-researcher 2 wanted to coach children; thus, he knew he needed teaching credentials in order to coach. He decided to choose elementary teaching because he could fit the classes into his college schedule; he was encouraged by a mentor to try elementary teaching when his schedule did not permit him to pursue the biology major he wanted. He made a “critical assessment of his assumptions” (Mezirow, 2000, p.22) and accepted a job as a first grade teacher. That became a life altering experience for him because he knew then that he had a major responsibility to his students to do the best he could for them. Although CR2 never wanted to be a first grade teacher, he had to learn to adapt to it, and during that process he learned to love it.

Another co-researcher recently began an elementary teaching career at the request of his current principal. She asked him to teach fifth grade math at the elementary school after her math teacher moved. CR3 settled into teaching math to elementary students. He formerly taught middle school and high school mathematics. Since his elementary school was departmentalized, this made the transition a bit easier for him; he taught math only, not all the other courses. As a teacher, he discovered that there are many unpredictable moments when dealing with children. While his decision to teach math to elementary

children was not life changing, it did provide him with what Mezirow (2000, p. 22) called “the exploration of options for a new role, relationships and options.”

Co-researcher 4 chose elementary teaching because his advisor suggested that elementary teaching would be a good idea. After much thought, he decided to accept the advice. In the ten years that he has been teaching, he has never regretted his decision to teach elementary children. He acknowledges that many of his family members were teachers, but that was not the main reason he chose to teach. His decision revolved around a desire to help his young students become well rounded; his concern was their social development as well as their academic growth.

Co-researcher 5 chose elementary teaching because he wanted to make a difference in the lives of his students. He was the product of a single parent home for most of his formative years. He wanted to be a role model for young people who also grew up in a single parent (mother only) home. His identity and reliability as a teacher are a large part of who he is. He mirrors Palmer’s (2007, p.10) beliefs that “good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.” CR5 tried to connect with his students and show them that he cared.

Co-researcher 6 wanted to be that figure that students looked up to and wanted to emulate. He wanted them to see the results of a healthy lifestyle, and being disciplined about that life style and actions that resulted from it. His decision to become an elementary teacher was what Levinson (1978, p. 80) described as, “A strong commitment to an enduring life structure.” CR6 is committed to his goals.

### **Implications for Social Change**

The shortage of male teachers in the elementary school environment has significant implications for social change. This shortage which has existed for more than 40 years is potentially a more serious problem today because many students do not have a positive male role model in their life. This study emphasized the experience of selected male elementary teachers from the teachers' points of view. All of the teachers in the study felt that elementary students needed a positive male role model during their elementary years. Male educators like female educators bring their own perspective to the classroom. Boys and girls in their formative school years need both viewpoints especially if they are not exposed to positive males in another setting.

The need for more male educators at the elementary level is evident (Evans & Jones, 2008). Elementary students need a good education from qualified and caring teachers of both genders including educators who look like them, and can share similar cultural experiences who serve as role models for them. Current gender disparities need to be addressed because our society needs a representative and diverse work force. Educators and educational program leaders need to confirm their support for more male primary/elementary teachers through what they say and what they do as pertains to the elementary classroom. The assumption that careers in primary/elementary teaching are suitable for females and not males restricts opportunity for both males and females.

### **Recommendations for Action**

There were several recommendations for action related to the findings in this study. These recommendations encourage educational leaders to recognize that male

teachers are an important entity in the primary/elementary school. To promote true change in the number of males teaching in elementary schools, school leaders must see the lack of male faculty members as a lack of diversity in their school, and have a desire to change.

State boards of education identify the requirements to gain a teaching certificate in the state. Once those requirements are met, it is up to local boards and local school leaders to cultivate an open, welcoming, and supportive environment of diversity among their professional staff members (Evans & Jones, 2008).

Male elementary teachers have the skills and training to work with young children. Some have additional expertise because they are fathers, themselves, who work with their own children. Males who want to teach can teach at any level if they have the desire, and are properly trained in the techniques to reach and teach young children. Teaching often becomes their passion (Thornton & Bricheno, 2008).

Principals and other educational leaders need to welcome male teachers into their schools by maintaining an open and supportive environment (Nelson & Shikwambi, 2010). Males can be recruited to teach specific subjects which they feel comfortable teaching. Some additional training in ways to reach young children may be needed.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to better understand and describe the male teacher experience in the elementary school setting. This study was limited to six male elementary teachers in three different school districts, one large and two small in the same southeastern state.

My recommendation for future research would include moving beyond defining and understanding the male elementary teacher experience to a comprehensive look at the impact of males in the lives of young children. Many of the teachers in this study felt a need to be a positive male role model for children who did not have a positive male influence in their lives. Several of the co-researchers also experienced no sustained positive male role model in their own early life. Public school systems and colleges of education administrators interested in addressing the need for more male educators at the elementary level must find ways to get more males involved in elementary teaching.

### **Reflections on the Researcher's Experience**

My experience with the phenomenon is quite different from the experience of my co-researchers because I am not a male and I am not an elementary teacher. Nonetheless, my male elementary teacher exposure began very early. My father was an elementary teacher long before my birth; my connection to the male elementary teacher experience has always existed and was an accepted part of my life. Like many others before him, my dad did not view teaching as just a job; it was who you were: a teacher. That meant that you had a major responsibility in the community, in the church, in the home, and especially in the school. As a teacher, you were an example no matter where you were; as such, the teacher had a strong responsibility to live up to expectations.

Many families with troubled or out of control children wanted their kids in my dad's room because they knew he would straighten them out, bring them back to the mainstream, put them back on the right path. He did it with firmness, patience, and love. He knew that they were basically good kids that just needed direction to get on the right

path. He was very good at that. Even strong two parent families often wanted their children exposed to my dad's teaching and discipline before they left the elementary school.

Growing up himself in a single parent home (mother only), he knew what it was like not to have a positive male role model in the home. He was determined to make a difference in the lives of his students. He was very successful in that area.

Thus, my male teacher experience was always quite positive, even though I completed grades 1-6 without personally having an elementary school teacher that was male. My dad taught sixth grade at the first elementary school I attended; he was the only male teacher on the faculty. He became a principal at the end of my third grade year; he changed schools and we went with him. My new school (grades K-8) eventually had about three male teachers. Although my dad was the principal, he chose to teach eighth grade math also because he wanted to interact as a teacher with his students, not just as an administrator. My dad was the only male teacher I had during those years. As a result of my early experiences with a father who was a powerful elementary educator, I have felt that exposure to a male educator during the formative years was important to the development of the whole child especially for those who did not have a positive male role model in their life because the influence of a strong caring male during the formative years makes a difference in the life of a child (Carrington, Tymms, & Merrell, 2008).

Interviewing six dedicated male elementary teachers provided an opportunity for me to hear how they view their job. To focus on the essence of the participants lived experiences, I bracketed my own views so that I would not add personal bias or opinions.

Every attempt was made to ensure that all responses and information presented during the interviews were those of the participants and accurately reported.

### **Summary**

This study adds new information to a body of literature on the experience of male teachers of young children; it can be used to develop strategies to increase the number of male elementary teachers. This is particularly important today when the percentage of male elementary teachers is not increasing. School systems can exert some control by offering a supportive environment and supportive programs geared toward increasing the number of male teachers of young children.

The majority of male primary/elementary teachers that participated in this study are the parents of young children themselves. They have a love for children and see the need for more male teachers of young children. As a result, they might be the best spokespersons for recruiting more males into primary/elementary teaching.

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### Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. How would you describe your day to day experience of teaching young children in a primary/elementary school environment?
2. How has the job been exactly what you expected or different from what you expected? (How has this decision affected your life?)
3. What has been most challenging (exciting, inspiring, or perplexing) about the job?
4. Are you confident or, are you concerned about your future in the primary/elementary school classroom?
5. How long have you been teaching primary/elementary students?
6. What impact do you think your gender has on your students' academic behavior and social behavior?
7. Do you have a key mentor or others who influenced you to choose primary/elementary teaching?
8. What experiences, ideas, or goals brought you here to primary/elementary teaching?
9. What advice would you give to a male who might be contemplating elementary teaching?
10. What do you consider your best asset as a teacher?
11. How do you use this to engage your students?

12. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience as a primary/elementary teacher?



## Appendix B: Informed Consent Document

You are invited to participate in a research study on male elementary teachers. The study focuses on how male teachers describe their day to day experience in the elementary classroom.

The research is being conducted by Alberta Richardson, a doctoral candidate at Walden University.

### **Background Information and Procedure:**

The purpose of this study will be to better understand and define the challenges faced by male teachers in the elementary school setting. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an individual interview session. The audio recorded interview will last from 40 to 60 minutes. After the interview is transcribed, you will be sent a copy to check for accuracy.

### **Procedures:**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:

- Participate in a private 1-1 in depth interview with the researcher to gather more details about your experiences in the elementary school environment. The interview will last from 40 to 60 minutes.
- You will have an opportunity to review your responses and a transcript of your interview prior to inclusion in the study. At the time you may make corrections, if you wish.

### **Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with the administration. If you initially decide to participate, you are still free to withdraw your participation at any time.

### **Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

The risks associated with participating in this study are very minimal; there may be societal benefits from participating in this study. In the event you experience stress or safety during participation in this study, you may terminate participation at any time. Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time.

### **Compensation:**

There will be no compensation for participation in this study.

**Costs:**

There are no costs to you or to the system for participating in this study.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept in a confidential location by the researcher. The interview audio and all data collected in this research will be kept confidential by the researcher and stored in a locked cabinet at the researcher's home for five years, at which time they will be destroyed. The response and participant identities will be coded so that individuals cannot be identified. All verbal and written reports will use only coded information. The names of both participants and their schools, and school districts where they serve will be kept confidential. Pseudonyms will be assigned to both the participant and the school where the participant serves before the interview begins.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is Alberta Richardson. The researcher's committee chair is Dr. Mitchell Olson, [Mitchell.olson@waldenu.edu](mailto:Mitchell.olson@waldenu.edu). You may ask any questions that you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me via phone at 251-610-3250 or email at [alberta.richardson@waldenu.edu](mailto:alberta.richardson@waldenu.edu). The Research Participant Advocate at Walden University is Dr. Lelani Endicott; you may contact her at [irb@walden.edu](mailto:irb@walden.edu) if you have any concerns about your participation in this study. Walden University's approval number for this study is 07-16-13-0125868 and it expires on July 15, 2014.

## Appendix C: Significant Statements

I can remember being in fifth grade; what I remember is not the content, but how I was treated.

Teaching is challenging and extremely rewarding.

I have kind of been a surrogate father for a little while.

Some of the children have heart-breaking experiences

I have been told that I am extremely patient.

I want children to have a positive experience that carries over into middle school.

Teaching is fun for me because it's something I want to do.

I try to make learning fun for the children

Because I am a male, I am able to talk to the children in a little bit different of a way.

I have conversations with boys that maybe the female teachers couldn't have with them.

I try to make learning fun for the children.

You can encourage little children to be whatever they want to be.

Some of my students may not have a role model that's a male in their lives.

In a small community like this everyone knows everyone, it's a non-revolving job.

I'm inspired by the kids.

Being a male teacher, you have a big opportunity to be a big impact on their lives.

We spend time outside school hours with some of our troubled male students.

I can sit and talk with students and find out what causes them to act in unacceptable ways.

My best asset as a teacher is building relationships with the students.

I think my gender has a positive impact on their academic achievement, especially the males.

I make sure I don't put myself in a negative situation, especially since I live in the community.

There is no worse thing about teaching; I love my job.

If you're not at the kids' level, you'll lose them.

My experiences have been grand.

Teaching has been very rewarding.

We tried boys group here at my school.

I enjoy teaching young kids in an elementary school.

Just being there through their whole life is almost like being a father to them.

I chose elementary teaching because I saw what it was like to have a father figure, and then have him not be there.

In this area single parent homes means just mother.

I always put God first in everything, so I don't see any barriers.

I greet each one of my kids when they come in and when they leave the room.

Teaching has been exactly what I expected when it comes to the kids.

It's a joy to get up just to come and be their teacher.

My first principal, a female, utilized me in different ways; she set me up for opportunities.

I'm looked over on different opportunities because I'm a male.

If I had a leadership role, I could bring the faculty and staff closer.

A key mentor motivated me to come to the elementary setting and be a role model to small kids.

We need more good role models.

I am happy I went to college to be an elementary teacher.

#### Appendix D: Letter of Invitation

Dear Teacher,

You are invited to participate in a research study on the unique experiences of male elementary teachers. The study is being conducted by a doctoral candidate named Alberta Richardson at Walden University.

The purpose of this study will be to better understand and define the challenges that male teachers face in the elementary school setting.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an individual interview session which will be audio taped. This session should last from 40 to 60 minutes.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current job. If you initially decide to participate, you are still free to withdraw your participation at any time. I have also included an informed consent document for your review and signature should you decide to participate in this study.

Your participation would be helpful, and I would be most appreciative of your consideration to participate.

I will contact you via email or telephone to schedule a date and time for the interview if you accept this invitation. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Alberta Richardson  
Ed.D. in Education Student, Walden University  
Alberta.richardson@waldenu.edu

## Curriculum Vitae

**Alberta N. Richardson****Professional Profile**

Skilled in bringing high school students into the twenty-first century using a unique combination of education experience coupled with up to date technology applications and issues cultivated by attending the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) annual technology conference.

- Hold Educational Specialist Degree in Counseling, a Master's Degree in Secondary Education and a Bachelor's Degree in English.
- Experienced in training teachers to use the Six Traits of Writing
- Dedicated to enthusiastic and dynamic teaching as a means of creating and nurturing a lifelong love of knowledge in young people.

**Education, Certification, and Honors****Doctoral Candidate 2013**

Walden University, Minneapolis, MN

**Ed.S. Counseling 1992**

Alabama State University (ASU), Montgomery, AL

**M.Ed. Secondary Education 1979**

ASU, Montgomery, AL

**Bachelor of Arts English 1972**

Spring Hill College, Mobile, AL

**Administrative Certification 2001**

ASU, Montgomery, AL

**Teacher of the Year Murphy High School 1997**

**Who's Who Among America's Teachers 1992, 1994, 1996, 2002**

**Key Training and Qualifications**

Certified (K-12) in Counseling and School Administration

Certified trainer for the Six Traits of Writing. Conducted workshops sponsored by

MCPSS to train secondary English teachers to use the writing traits.

ACCESS (Alabama Connecting Classrooms, Educators, & Students Statewide) Trained Distance Learning April 2008

### **Curriculum Writing Activities**

Served on the Curriculum Writing Committee Mobile County Public Schools

- Language Arts Curriculum 1989-2004, 2006
- Technology Curriculum May, June 2008

### **Employment, and Education Advisory Boards**

#### **Professional Experience in Education**

- **Teacher, Murphy High School**, October 1974 to January 2009
- **Advisory Committee Spring Hill College Department of Teacher Education** 2004 to 2008  
Mobile, AL
- **Advisory Board University of South Alabama (USA) College of Education Department of Leadership & Teacher Education** 2004-2005  
Mobile, AL
- **Alabama State Department of Education Textbook Committee** 2006-2007  
Reading and Language Arts PreK-12

#### **Technology Related Workshops**

- **Workshop Co-Presenter**, June 2002  
Alabama Education Technology Conference (AETC) Montgomery, AL
- **Workshop Co-Presenter** Six Traits Writing Workshop MCPSS
- **Accepted as Workshop Presenter**, June 2005  
Alabama Education Technology Conference Montgomery, AL

#### **Professional Affiliations**

International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE)  
National Education Association (NEA)  
Alabama Education Association (AEA)  
Mobile County Education Association (MCEA)



**Civic Affiliations**

Keep Mobile Beautiful Board (KMB)

Board Secretary 2013, 2014

Mobile Historic Development Commission (MHDC)

Commissioner since 2011