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Experiences of Male Teachers in the Elementary Grades

Samuel K. Henry

Rhode Island College, shenry_3678@email.ric.edu

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EXPERIENCES OF MALE TEACHERS IN THE ELEMENTARY GRADES

By

Samuel K. Henry

An Honors Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Honors

in

The Department of Elementary Education

Feinstein School of Education and Human Development

Rhode Island College

2012

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Abstract

Teaching in the elementary grades is a profession generally seen more suited for women. However, an increasing number of elementary schools are recruiting more males to apply to teach grades K-6. The purpose of this study was to listen to the stories of males in the elementary grades and to understand the experiences, advantages or disadvantages of being a male teacher in the elementary grades. Ethnographic methods, such as interviews, field notes, observations, were used. Eight male teachers with varying backgrounds from six elementary schools were interviewed. In conclusion, the domination of females in the field is still present. A large majority of the male teachers noted that they were hired purely based on gender. Physical contact with the students was a major concern with these teachers; however the response to male teachers by students and their families was positive towards having a male teacher.

Acknowledgements

I extend my gratitude toward my advisor, Dr. MacGregor Kniseley, for his invaluable assistance throughout the completion of this project. I greatly appreciate the eight male elementary teachers and their schools for allowing time for participation in this study. And, I appreciate Dr. Jennifer Cook who assisted in developing the research question.

Chapter 1 – Statement of Problem

In today's society, teaching in the elementary grades is a profession seen suited more for women. There is an unspoken social stereotype that the elementary grades are very nurturing and that men lack this ability. When a male shares the fact that he is studying or applying for a job in the elementary education, people respond: "Wow, that's great! We need more males in the elementary grades. You will have no problem getting a job" or "Really? Why? Wouldn't you rather be a principal?"

The purpose of this study is to listen to the stories of males in the elementary grades. Did they experience these same stereotypes? Did they have trouble finding a job, or was it as easy as some say it would be? Did they have to make the hard decision of whether or not to even continue in the elementary education field due to the reactions of other people? This study details the challenges or advantages of being a male teacher in the elementary grades.

Chapter 2 – Review of Related Literature

Teaching in today's elementary schools is seen as an occupation more suited for women because women are assumed to possess the maternal instinct to nurture and to teach. However, elementary, middle level, or high school teaching was not always a female-dominated profession.

According to *Only a Teacher*, from colonial times and into the early decades of the 19th century, most teachers were men. The more educated and ambitious schoolmasters were young men who made the schoolroom a stepping-stone on their way to careers in the church or the law.” (para. 1)

Men were the primary teachers for decades until the increasing number of "new schools across the country demanded greater numbers of educated teachers. In order to staff the schools, communities turned to women, spurring the feminization of the teaching profession - the entry and eventual domination of women in the workforce” (*Only a Teacher*, para. 4). For men, this was the starting point of the phenomenon that males are not suited to teach in the elementary grades. When a male enters this field of work, society questions whether or not he possesses these maternal instincts that males are not “naturally” supposed to have. This unsaid stereotype hinders the detection as to “how men might make a unique contribution to elementary teaching” (Coulter, 1993, p. 401).

Not personally having had a male teacher until the seventh grade, I feel as though I was deprived of the experience of a break in the monotonous female teacher cycle. I want to believe that having a male teacher early in my education could have presented me with a different perspective on things, different ways to do things, and a secondary male figure to admire. For

some students, this male teacher may be the primary male role model. Coulter (1993, p. 399) suggested that "male teachers [in the elementary grades] serve as role models for boys and father substitutes for children from female-headed, lone-parent families."

However, Coulter (1993) concluded that "claims for male elementary teachers as important same-sex role models are not supported empirically: boys who have male teachers do not have fewer problems in school nor are they better adjusted; boys from father-absent homes do not imitate or rely more on male teachers than other boys" (p. 399).

Through research, I will confirm or deny Coulter's conclusion.

The issues of gender and masculinity of male elementary educators is also explored in research in which "gender is highly problematized and [male teachers in the elementary grades] negotiate the meaning of masculinity every day" (Allan, 1993, p. 114). The reasons elementary schools are asking more male teachers to apply is not fully explained in research to date. "Until the purposes for 'more men in elementary' are clarified, individual men will continue to experience the contradictions of doing 'women's work' and being 'real men' at the same time" (Coulter, 1993, p. 411).

Chapter 3 – Methodology

For this study I used ethnographic methods, such as interviews, field notes, and observations. In a way I am studying the subculture of male teachers in the elementary grades and their experiences. First, Dr. Kniseley provided a list of potential subjects fitting into the criteria of a male teacher in the elementary grades. Later, I identified other subjects whom I knew personally.

I sent out a preliminary survey via email to these possible interviewees (Appendix A). The survey determined who was interested in the research and who was willing to be interviewed for the project. I planned to interview multiple male teachers across the elementary grades with varying backgrounds. I considered teaching experience, family background, and where they earned their teaching degrees.

I used qualitative, applied research methods. Through these interviews, I analyzed patterns of experiences of male teachers in the elementary grades.

Eight male elementary teachers were interviewed. Each teacher signed a release which allowed the researcher to voice record the interview and use their responses in the study (Appendix B). The interviewees responded to fifteen identical questions (Appendix C). Additional prompts were used to gain additional data (Appendix C).

Chapter 4 – Analysis of Results

The analysis of results for this study revealed multiple patterns and similarities. The main points the data demonstrated follow:

- The general stereotype of the elementary education classroom is still prevalent. Females dominate the field and a male in place raises concerns within the framework of today's society.
- Elementary schools are recruiting males to apply to teach grades K-6 and often, male teachers were hired purely based on gender.
- Parents and students responded positively to having a male teacher in the elementary grades. They think male teachers serve as a good role models for students who lack positive male role models at home.
- Physical contact with the students is a primary concern among the eight male teachers interviewed.

Before any data analysis can begin, a researcher must decide how to structure the framework for the analysis. The purpose of this study was to find patterns across the interviews and elaborate upon them. For my purposes, I will define a pattern as a 50% rating, or 4 out of 8 interviewees mentioning the topic. With a sample size as small as eight interviewees, seeing a 50% similar response is a pattern. There is a difference between a pattern and a similarity; some similarities in this study will be pointed out which have around a 25% rating, or 2 out of 8 interviewees mentioning the topic. Patterns within the question heading itself will be explored, as well as patterns over the entire research.

The male teachers interviewed for this study varied in their ages, experience, interests, and viewpoints. One similarity is background. About 25% of the interviewees stated that their previous career was in construction, as contractors and sub-contractors. This presents a very

different viewpoint switching from another career to elementary education. Construction is often considered a very "manly" field and a general stereotype of construction workers is that they are vulgar. Making the change from this very "manly" field to the "nurturing" field of elementary education is a challenging transition. "Coming in [as] a male and working with young children seemed strange to me. From working construction to sitting in front of a classroom of kids" (Teacher A).

Nearly 90% of the subjects did not know what to expect when they entered the field of education. "I didn't know what to expect [when I entered the field]. It was overwhelmingly female, and it remains that way" (Teacher F). Statements like these are reinforcements of the general view: the elementary grades are dominated by females. "Other than the music teacher and the custodian, I'm the only guy around here" (Teacher D). A male in the elementary setting is primarily seen as a "specialist" before a classroom teacher, whether that be a music, an art, or physical education teacher.

The eight subjects explained their experience with the job search, application, and hiring process. Most subjects agreed that an increasing number of elementary schools are begging more males to apply to teach grades K-6.

When asked if gender played a role in the hiring process, 63% of interviewees (five of the eight) reported that "I was hired because I was a male" (Teacher C). That is not a coincidence. The other three interviewees did not fully believe that they were hired because of their gender; however they "[weren't] sure if gender played a role [in the hiring process], but it might have" (Teacher G). Assuming that the other three teachers were not told by the hiring committee the basis upon which they were employed, and that they were hired purely upon the fact of gender,

that would mean that 100% of the interviewed teachers were hired because they were a male.

This is purely an assumption, but if valid it would present a huge pattern. It would seem that this goes against the general stereotype. Are elementary schools really attempting to hire more males to combat this notion?

Putting gender aside, the subjects indicated other factors contributing to winning a teaching job. 50% of the interviewees stated that serving as a long-term or daily substitute teacher was a huge factor in increasing their opportunity of winning a teaching position. "I landed a long-term [substitute teaching job] right away my first semester out of college, subbed that year, and was hired that summer" (Teacher H).

Age was another contributing factor. 25% of the interviewees stated that "being a little older helped" them get hired (Teacher D). They believed it gave them an edge on the competition. The old adage "with age comes wisdom" is at play here, and they saw it as the fact that they have more experience in life and that would help while in the classroom.

When asked what the most challenging aspects of the beginning years of teaching, 63% indicated that behavior management and conflict resolution was the hardest. "Management is #1: how to manage the kids is probably the hardest thing. You can't teach if you can't manage kids" (Teacher C). Survival during the early years of teaching in the elementary classroom means establishing a well-managed classroom. Hours of lesson planning and preparing mean nothing when there are behavior problems that interfere with instruction.

On the other hand, teaches noted the support that helped them succeed during beginning years of teaching. 63% of interviewees stated that having a mentor during their first few years of teaching was beneficial. Many districts now provide new teachers with a mentor to aid them with

any questions they have. "At the time [I was hired] there was a male and a female teacher in every classroom. She was my mentor; she taught me so much, taught me how to teach" (Teacher F). Some interviewees stated that having an experienced male teacher as a mentor would have helped more, although the ability to have a mentor at all was invaluable. "Luckily I had a great mentor and a coach. If I did not have that support it would have been an absolute (expletive) show" (Teacher E).

38% of the interviewees stated that they experienced a negative response from the women around them.

It's a very competitive environment... When it comes to being a male, and you come into this environment, the women have the attitude that the men are lucky to be in this environment working with them, so they need to "watch it." "Don't try to make us look bad in any kind of way;" that's what the attitude is. I'll be honest with you, in some ways it can be difficult for a male in [elementary education]. We're a minority; it's always been a women's profession, and to have guys moving in, I don't think they really like that, especially if you are better than them at certain things (Teacher C).

Since three subjects taught in the same school, there was an opportunity to compare the experiences of males in the same setting. It was interesting to learn how they were treated by female teachers or administrators in the same building. One would assume their experiences would be similar. In this case, one viewpoint differed vastly from the others.

"[Surrounded by female teachers in my grade,] everyone will tell you that I am the odd man out. I am sometimes left out of the loop at inappropriate times" (Teacher A).

"At this school, I have been through some rough times. The response by [female colleagues] has stayed the same; they have tried to push me out and make me go to the job fair. I won't go" (Teacher C).

The experience of these two teachers differed from the experience of the third teacher.

"[Female response] was fine; they were pretty welcoming because they saw me as a novice teacher, so I was pretty well accepted" (Teacher G).

This teacher taught previously for one year in another school. His answer to female response may have been related to the experience in this first school, or it may be a general "beginning years" answer. Whether the difference in experiences is due to personality or an uncomfortable rapport with the interviewer is unclear.

The response of the students and their parents to having a male elementary teacher was personally interesting. How do the students respond? How do the parents feel about their child having a male teacher?

100% of interviewees reported a positive response from parents and students.

"Some parents started out questioning, but have changed. With experience, they [start to] trust you" (Teacher A).

Questioning whether parent/student response was based purely on gender, one interviewee stated that the response was "nothing but positive. I try to get the parents involved as much as I can, [but] I don't think it's any different for me as it is for a female" (Teacher B).

Another interviewee stated that "gender has not been as much of an issue or topic as age. It used to be that [parents] wanted an experienced teacher, but now a lot of parents want the

younger teacher for their flexibility and new ideas" (Teacher E). The experiences differed. Some parents/students respond well based purely on the "novelty" of having a male teacher, and other's based on personality, age, and other non-gender related points.

25% of interviewees reported an initial restraint by some of their female students due to the newness of having a male classroom teacher.

I have had parents come to me and tell me their daughter cried all summer when they found out I was going to be the teacher. When they come home from the first day of school, [they tell their parents that] "that was the best day of school I have ever had; he's unbelievable!" (Teacher A).

50% of interviewees stated they were told by parents that their child having a male as a teacher was a good male role model.

Especially in this area, a lot of kids are coming from divorced homes and frequently they are living with their mom. Often the male role model was not the best, so I often hear "I'm so happy my child has you" but not because I'm a good teacher, but because I'm a guy (Teacher D).

The male teachers' ideas for improving the teacher education program were interesting. 75% of interviewees believed the teachers education program needs to be changed to include "more hands-on" and "more classes on management" and additional practical experience. In addition, 25% of interviewees stated that the stereotypes overarching males in the elementary grades needs to be addressed in the teacher preparation courses. Physical contact with the students needs to be examined and that prospective teachers understand that gender roles are separate.

"You can't be as close to the [students] as a female can" (Teacher G). "When I started, I felt I could touch children. Kids sat on my lap. Now I feel I can't be alone in a room with a child, let alone touch one" (Teacher F).

75% of interviewees mentioned this topic of physical contact with children during the interview. When prompted with *what are some things you have to do differently as a male in the elementary grades*, it was the first thing the two remaining interviewees addressed. With the addition of these two teachers, 100% of interviewees mentioned that physical contact with students is different between a male and a female teacher in the elementary grades.

Don't get close to them; keep them at distance. Keep your door open. Don't ever touch one, unless someone is around, because you never know. Watch the way you say things. You definitely have to be careful. If you keep kids in for recess, keep your door open. Kids are smart today, and they know these things. "Mr. _____ touched me". If a [male] did what a female could in the classroom, he would be on the front page of the paper (Teacher C).

Finally, interviewees provided *suggestions/advice do you have for males who are planning a career as an elementary teacher* to understand how what they experienced affected advice they would give a male considering elementary teaching as a career. "Be yourself," "go for it," "don't be scared away," and "make yourself stand out" were some of the positive responses I received. Unfortunately, positivity was not always the case.

I would change my major at this point. They are stressing us out with all this work that doesn't seem to be helping the education of the child. I probably would have chosen a different career path knowing what I know now. The profession as a general whole seems to

be going in not a great direction at this point; they don't really listen to what we have to say as a teacher, we are just told what to do (Teacher G).

The question lies with the males who are planning a career as an elementary teacher. Do the benefits of the job outweigh the hidden things that nobody is told?

Chapter 5 – Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to listen to the stories of males in the elementary grades and to understand the experiences of male teachers in the elementary grades. In conclusion, the general stereotype of the elementary education classroom prevail: Females dominate the field and a male in place raises some flags within the framework of today's society. Physical contact with the students is a primary concern among the eight male teachers interviewed. Parents and students responded positively to having a male teacher in the elementary grades. They serve as a good male role model for students who lack positive male role models at home.

Recommendations for Further Research

Increasingly, elementary schools are recruiting males to apply to teach grades K-6 and often hire a teacher because he is male. A major hurdle of this project was initial contact with the prospective teachers. Many teachers did not receive the preliminary and follow-up emails due to email server problems. A simple phone call to the main office of the school to leave a message is the most effective way to contact these teachers.

Due to the small sample size, future researchers could use the results of this study as a starting point for a larger scale study. The research could include a larger sample of male teachers in the elementary grades representing a larger geographic region.

Another topic to research is the public's view of a teacher's sexual orientation. Some interviewees touched on this topic briefly during the interview. The teachers stated a questioning response by the public when sharing their career choice. There was a hint of perplexity of the teacher's sexual orientation and his choice to work with small children. This topic can be expanded upon in further research.

After listening to the differing experiences of these male teachers in the elementary grades, the question still presents itself: do the benefits of the job outweigh the hidden things that nobody is told? This is a topic that would be incredibly interesting to expand upon in further research.

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Appendix A – Recruitment Letter

Dear (Invitee),

My name is Samuel Henry, and I am a student at Rhode Island College. For my Senior Honors Research Project, I am conducting a study to understand the experiences of male elementary teachers in their own words pertaining to the benefits or limitations of being a male teacher in the elementary schools.

I asked my advisor Dr. Kniseley to recommend male elementary teachers to interview for this project. He nominated you because he or a colleague in the Department of Elementary Education has worked with you at a College field placement.

I plan to interview many male teachers across the elementary grades with varying levels of experience. Patterns found across these interviews will be explored and elaborated upon. I will interview male teachers about their experience, starting with the hiring process and then exploring the growth along to continuum from a “beginning teacher” to a “veteran teacher.”

The interview will take approximately one hour. Each interview conducted will use the same questions and then patterns and insights across these interviews will be explored. The data collected from this study will be used in a report and presented to a committee. The idea of submitting this report for publication will be explored.

Of course, confidentiality in this study is of the utmost importance. To assure privacy of the interviewee, real names and places will not be used in any reports or public presentations. Pseudonyms for the teacher will be provided, and all records of the interview including audio recordings and interview notes will be stored on a secure hard drive. A consent form will be provided to the interviewee to ensure confidentiality.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and is not required by your job. If you do not wish to participate, or feel unsafe with participating in this study you are free to decline.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at shenry_3678@ric.edu or my advisor, Dr. MacGregor Kniseley, Professor, Department of Elementary Education, at mkniseley@ric.edu.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sam Henry", written on a light-colored background.

Sam Henry

Appendix B – Consent Form**CONSENT DOCUMENT****Rhode Island College**

Experiences of Male Teachers in the Elementary Grades

You are being asked to participate in a research study about the experiences of males in the elementary teaching profession. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a male elementary teacher. Please read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the research.

Samuel Henry, student, at Rhode Island College is conducting this study.

Background Information

The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences of male teachers in the elementary grades, investigating their experiences from the hiring process, to “getting their feet wet” in teaching, to becoming a more experienced teacher. Ethnographic methods, such as interviews, field notes, observations, and surveys (electronic and/or paper based), will be used to conduct this study. Ten to twelve male teachers at different stages of teacher development will be interviewed; the same interview questions across each participant. Data will be analyzed for any patterns in experience, and these patterns will be explored and elaborated upon. I will report on the findings to each participating teacher after completing the research.

Procedures

If you agree to be a participant in this research, you will be asked to do the following things: A time to meet will be established, and an interview will be held. A series of questions will be proposed about which you will go into detail. These interviews will be voice recorded (with your consent) for later transcription. The interview will take approximately one hour.

Risks of Being in the Study

The risks of participating in this research are minimal, meaning that they are about the same as what you would experience in your normal daily activities.

Benefits to You

Participants will be able to reflect on their teaching and learn about other male teachers’ experiences by reading the report of the investigation.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation is completely voluntary. It is not required by your job. You can choose not to participate in this research and it will have no effect on your employment. Also, you can change your mind about participating at any time with no negative consequences

_____ Initial here to indicate that you have read and understood this page.

RIC Institutional Review BoardApproval # 1011-52Expiration Date: 4/7/2012

Confidentiality

The records of this research will be kept private. In any sort of report that might be published, the researcher will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you.

Research records will be kept in a secured file, and access will be limited to the researcher. If there are problems with the study, the research records may be viewed by Rhode Island College review board responsible for protecting human participants and other government agencies that protect human participants in research. All data will be kept for a minimum of three years, after which it will be destroyed.

Contacts and Questions

The researcher conducting this study is Samuel Henry. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have any questions later, you may contact him at shenry_3678@ric.edu, or his advisor Dr. MacGregor Kniseley, Professor, Department of Elementary Education, at MKniseley@ric.edu.

If you think you were treated unfairly or would like to talk to someone other than the researcher about your rights or safety as a research participant, please contact Dr. Christine Marco, Chair of the Rhode Island College Institutional Review Board at IRB@ric.edu, or by phone at 401-456-8598, or by writing to Dr. Christine Marco, Chair IRB; c/o Department of Psychology, Horace Mann Hall 311; Rhode Island College; 600 Mount Pleasant Avenue; Providence, RI 02908.

You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

Statement of Consent

I have read and understand the above information, and I agree to participate in the study "Experiences of Male Teachers in the Elementary Grades." I understand that my participation is voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time with no negative consequences. I have received answers to the questions I asked, or I will contact the researcher with any future questions that arise. I am at least 18 years of age.

I agree do not agree to be audiotaped for this study.

Print Name of Participant: _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Name of Researcher Obtaining Consent: Samuel Henry

Appendix C – Question List

1. What level undergraduate and graduate degrees did you earn? Where did you receive your teacher training?
2. How long have you taught, and at which grade levels? At which schools have you taught?
3. What other careers have you had besides professional teacher?
4. What were your thoughts and/or assumptions of entering the field as a male teacher in the elementary grades?
5. Tell me about your experience with the job search, job application and hiring process.
6. What selection factors contributed to getting hired?
7. What were the advantages/disadvantages, if any, of being a male through the hiring process?
8. What challenges did you face during your beginning years of teaching?
9. Tell me your experience of a male teacher, starting with “getting your feet wet” in teaching, to becoming a more experienced educator.
10. Do you feel you have experienced discrimination/bias or received privileges as a result of being a male teacher? Explain your answer.
11. How have female teachers/assistants/other staff/principals responded to you and how were you treated by fellow female teachers/assistants/other staff/principals when you first started teaching? Fellow male teachers (if applicable)? Did their response/treatment of you change over time?
12. How have your students and their parents/families responded to you as a male teacher over the years?
13. What suggestions/advice do you have for males who are planning a career as an elementary teacher?
14. What suggestions do you have for teacher education programs who are preparing males for elementary school teaching?
15. What suggestions do you have for district administrators who supervise/support male elementary teachers?

Additional Prompt

1. What are some things you have to do differently as a male in the elementary grades?