

'Can I Get Directions to the High School?'
The Influence, Importance, and *Absence* of Male Elementary Educators
in B.C.'s Fraser Valley

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EDUC 610- Qualitative Analysis in Education

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April 12/24

I began my own educational journey as an adult over twenty years ago. A product of an environment that didn't value public K to 12 schooling nearly enough, the unrealistic and undesirable atmosphere of post-secondary education was not seen as a remote possibility for a student like me. While my family was loving, and I was fortunate enough to have both of my parents present throughout my childhood, we were not by any means financially stable or able to maintain secure housing. As such, I experienced a portion, albeit a small one, of the struggles that many students face currently in elementary schools in British Columbia, including the Fraser Valley.

As a student myself growing up through the K to 12 system in British Columbia, as well as during my first experiences in post-secondary, I began to recognize the number of different journeys that students take through their time in the public sector. What has appeared to remain seemingly homogeneous however, has been the lack of male teachers working in the younger grades. Upon working through my teacher education programs as a prospective student-teacher in 2015, my practicum experiences were exclusively in an elementary school cohort. Out of 30 prospective teacher-candidates in this grouping, only four were male. A meagre 13% of student teachers, this was a surprisingly high percentage, in comparison to the gender distribution that currently resides within the Abbotsford School District, where I am currently employed as a classroom teacher. Compiled from Abbyschools.ca, only 46 out of a potential 551, or 8.34%, contracted teaching positions were held by male-identifying teachers in the elementary grades. As such, this disproportionate representation in the younger grades is something that I wish to focus upon.

The desire to investigate this phenomenon surrounding the significant lack of qualified male teachers in the elementary and primary grades is both topical and timely to the current state of education in British Columbia, and the Fraser Valley more specifically. Having worked with many intermediate-elementary students who have experienced systemic educational interruptions during the Covid-19 pandemic, the long-term wide-reaching effects are still being felt in classrooms daily. As significant as any, the dramatic change to the approaches regarding Social Emotional Learning (SEL) have followed many other changing aspects of modern education, and within these, a renewed call for qualified male teachers has seen a resurgence as well. Traditionally the domain of predominantly women, elementary education now faces many of the widespread SEL needs that older grades do.

This reality of the dynamic SEL needs of the modern-day elementary classroom have directed the research question(s) that I wish to investigate:

- 1) Do male educators in elementary/primary schools have a responsibility or obligation, to be 'role models' in their respective positions?
- 2) Can we quantify the influence that male educators have on the students that they work with daily?
- 3) Why are male educators seemingly hesitant to pursue careers in primary/elementary education?

AND;

- 4) What steps can be introduced for early career teachers and teacher-candidates to help incentivize them towards early/primary education?

Literature Review

To provide needed contextual research, as well as to provide background to many of the challenges and unique opportunities that are present and topical for male educators in primary education, the attached literature review will be split into three significant themes: fatherhood and paternal responsibility in elementary education, gender stereotyping of masculinity and heteronormativity in elementary education, and employment opportunities and recruitment in primary education for men.

Fatherhood and Paternal Responsibility in Education

While not only relevant to men working in elementary education, the role of 'paternal responsibility' in classrooms and schools is changing dramatically. As such, a wide variety of requirements, including the teaching of facets of SEL, are being required of teachers, and especially male elementary ones, in daily professional practice. The essay by Ed Brockenbrough "You Ain't My Daddy!: Black Male Teachers and the Politics of Surrogate Fatherhood," (2012) provides an insightful viewpoint of the challenges faced by many male teachers, and specifically *black* male teachers, as they manage the responsibilities associated with being seen as role models in an urban, predominantly black school district located in upstate New York, outside of Syracuse. An interesting Participatory-Action Research (PAR) project, it highlights a variety of demands that are faced by African-American teachers.

Similarly, the involvement of fathers, and male caregivers, in pre-kindergarten programs is something that needs to be investigated further. According to McBride et al. (2001) in "Intervening with Teachers to Encourage Father/Male Involvement in Early

Childhood Programs,” there is a definitive link between fathers, and other positive male influences and the long-term social success of children in their elementary years.

Through qualitative interviews and informal feedback, McBride paints a clear picture of the importance of male involvement in early childhood development.

The work by Schell and Courtney (1979) predates most of the other scholarly work in this piece surrounding the importance of male educators but provides a developed outlook on what was deemed important at the time in the lives of grade-six students without a father-figure: academic achievement. While the article does not consider ideas like social-emotional learning, it does give a starting point when investigating the importance of male leadership for elementary students.

Stereotypes of Masculinity and Heteronormativity in Early Education

A second theme that arises in the literature supporting this work surrounds the roles of ‘traditional’ masculinity and heteronormativity in male educators’ life experiences. Research conducted by Simon Brownhill (2021) from the University of Cambridge poses the question “Should male teachers aspire to be ‘role models?’ or merely facilitate the relationships between students and those who *should* be their role models?” In its steps to define masculine responsibility in education, it departs from a significant portion of literature and provides a differing viewpoint on whether male teachers should aspire to be a significant positive influence in the lives of primary aged boys. Formed around a series of qualitative interviews with certified teachers and teacher-trainees, it provides a unique perspective on the role and influence of male teachers.

Seen as an important contributor to early research surrounding sex and gender-role stereotypes in education, Mancus (1992) highlights a number of important themes through quantitative questionnaires with elementary-aged students, including the value of having male teachers present. Published in 1992, her work served as a significant starting point for many pieces of literature in the years to come.

Much like Mancus' work, the article written by Joanne McDowell (2023) delves into the impact of gendered expectations that men often face when entering the education profession. Highlighting the 'double bind' surrounding masculine norms and heteronormativity, McDowell interviews both men and women working in the education field in the United Kingdom. Through qualitatively focused sessions, she highlights and expands upon the pressures that many men find within systemic education, often leading to them leaving the profession.

Titled suggestively, "Real Men or Real Teachers? Contradictions in the Lives of Elementary Teachers" (2020) by Paul Sargent, highlights many public perceptions that male educators face on a daily basis. Arguing that men are under closer scrutiny surrounding their contact with young children, Sargent's work concentrates on ethnographic and focus-group interviews to look into the lived experiences of male teachers and demonstrates the precautionary and compensatory measures that many take when interacting with students, and in doing so illuminates another significant reason why men are often hesitant to go into the primary education field.

Employment Opportunities for Men in Education

Challenges surrounding the apparent declining numbers of male teachers have been the focus of a significant amount of literature as well. First, Ian Davis and Stephen

Hay from the Queensland University of Technology (2018) provide an in-depth analysis of pre-existing literature surrounding the significant shortage of male teachers in Australia, while focusing predominantly on primary teachers. Within their study, they make significant references to Skelton and Mancus, both of which are viewed as important contributors to the field of gender studies and gender stereotyping within the education system in Australia.

Through a trio of articles, K.F. McGrath et al. investigate “The Plight of the Male Teacher” (2020) and highlight the importance of male primary educators for both boys and girls. Based off the results of qualitative group interviews and quantitative surveys with sixth-grade students and their parents, it displays a robust desire for more male primary educators. Subsequently, the essays conclude that the presence of male teachers being present in younger grades is not only beneficial to boys, but to girls too.

Addressing many of the issues brought forward by Davis and Hay, *Men and the Classroom: Gender Imbalances in Teaching* (2005) by Drudy et al. provides a well-developed, comprehensive analysis to a number of challenges that men specifically face in the classroom, as well as posing the question “How do we get more men into teaching?” Touching on a variety of feminist influences within the education profession, *Men and the Classroom* investigates widespread beliefs and misconceptions surrounding the roles of men in the classroom and elsewhere. Drawing on research from a variety of institutions within Ireland, Drudy provides an extremely insightful, well-rounded in-depth investigation into the ‘why’ of men not entering education on a larger scale.

While there has been significant research in these three aforementioned areas, the researchers have posed far more questions than answers. Absent from many of these previously mentioned pieces, however, a focus on future hiring practices and subsequent retention of male educators in the years to come. Moving forward, this work intends to investigate the 'why' and 'why not' of how future scholarship may be able to look further into how primary education can become more enticing to newer male teachers.

Ontological Perspective

As previously mentioned in the introduction of this essay, my own perspectives surrounding the state of primary education in British Columbia, and the Fraser Valley more specifically, have been formed by the experiences that I have lived through. As a result, I wish my own research to follow this same *relativist* ontology. Based in a *constructivist* paradigm that the social world is dependent on how we interpret the world, (Mayan, 2023) I wish to interact with participants in a way that respects their own autonomy and highlights the individual perspectives and stories surrounding their lived experience.

Simultaneously, this work will need to be cognizant of holistic research perspectives that need to be better represented in future scholarship. As stated by Mayan (2023), while Indigenous people's cultural perspectives, traditions, and colonial experiences have frequently been represented in research, the theoretical contributions of Indigenous researchers remain under-recognized and underappreciated both within and outside of universities and other institutions.

Methodology

This study will intend to use a qualitative-centric approach to a wide variety of foci. Much like previous literature that has utilized Participatory-Action Research, the proposed work will utilize several facets of *narrative inquiry*. As I've made mention of already, it is my belief that an individual's understandings of the world are shaped by the social dynamics that they face daily. Whether that is an environment of affluence, social privilege, or political cachet, an individual's perceptions of the world around them will be diametrically opposed to those who do not share the same experiences.

This perception of primary education in British Columbia, and the greater climate of public education in general, will influence the scope of how narrative inquiry will be constructed throughout the research. Having worked predominantly in neighborhoods, and with families, that face significant socio-economic challenges on a daily basis, these individuals will comprise a significant portion of the demographic with which I will interact. Affected by larger systemic issues such as housing insecurity, substance dependency, unemployment, or familial trauma, many students arrive at elementary school looking for the only safe, relaxed environment that they may experience at any point in their daily lives.

Both relevant and timely to these larger societal issues, the systemic expectations of male teachers are changing in relation to the diverse family makeups that many students live within. Wood (2018) agrees with this sentiment as he states that greater attention is being given to social and emotional issues in education, and with that, the roles and skills expected of school staff members shifted from one of 'educator'

towards one of 'educarer,' incorporating a renewed emphasis on pastoral support and care.

Research Methods/Procedures

This holistic approach to support and care will form the basis for how this work will be conducted. Proposed will be a multi-step approach to interviewing with three separate populations operating within elementary schools within the Fraser Valley:

- 1) Small-group (4-6) informal interviews with grade four and five students. To glean consistency in a diversity of responses, as well as demographics, every attempt will be made to create heterogeneous interview groups, in respect to sex, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic background.

As these interviews will potentially take 30-45 minutes each to conduct, it is my intention to conduct a group interview five times, with a sample size of twenty to thirty respondents, representing an approximate population akin to the size of a classroom in grades 4 to 12 in British Columbia.

- 2) One-on-one focused interviews with approximately five parents of grade four and five-aged students. Questions will surround parental perceptions of male elementary teachers, as well as attempt to elicit insights to the efficacy surrounding male educators in regard to the social-emotional challenges faced by both boys and girls in elementary schools. Finally, interviews will conclude with personal reflection from parents on what they hope to see happen regarding representation of male teachers in elementary schools, and whether they see the need for systemic change.

Once again, all attempts will be made to solicit responses from a diverse population, consisting of both male and female participants. Special consideration will be given to single-parent households, as well as those who have had male teachers instruct their children in the previous years.

- 3) Personal interviews with *male-identifying* prospective teacher-candidates currently participating in teacher education programs, enrolled in local universities in the Fraser Valley. Attempts will be made to elicit responses solely from potential elementary educators; however, middle, and high-school teachers will be included if an adequate number of responses can't be obtained.

Planned as 30-45 minute individual interviews, conversations will include educator perceptions surrounding the 'need' for male educators in elementary school, as well as querying the 'why' that *they* (the teacher-candidates) were drawn to elementary education when many of their peers were not. Finally, questioning will surround how, and *can*, school districts entice more male educators to pursue teaching careers in the younger grades.

Potential Concerns and Limitations

As this study will involve a number of community members and demographics, I will need to be cognizant of power imbalances and 'how power comes to bear.' (Leavy, 2017) Due to the fact that I hope to interview elementary-aged students from several socio-economically depressed populations, I need to recognize the possibility for confirmation bias from students and parents alike, who may potentially be looking to appease the interview process and give the potential "correct" answer.

Due to this proposed research population (students, parents, teacher-candidates) recruitment may potentially be difficult. For this reason, correspondence will be sent out through the Abbotsford School District, referencing UNBC Graduate Studies, as well as the University of Fraser Valley (UFV), all of which I have professional relationships with. As a nearly ten-year employee of School District #34, as well as acting previously as a *School Associate* for the UFV Teacher Education program, I have pre-existing positive relationships that should hopefully aid in my acquiring research participants.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, will be the respectful, ethical approach that will be utilized while interviewing elementary-aged participants. Special consideration will be given to ongoing parental consent, and every transcript involving minors will be made available upon parent/guardian request. As such, consent will be as transparent as possible and may be recalled at any point. Additionally, as outlined in the attached *Appendix A*, confidentiality of individuals, as well as anonymity will remain paramount to elicit honest, topical responses and insights. Any and all, information will be utilized solely for the purpose of this particular research and will not be distributed to unauthorized third parties.

Analysis of Data/Findings

Results of findings of the mentioned interviews will be grouped based upon the demographics (students, parents, teacher-candidates) that participate. Through written transcripts, thematic coding will be utilized to investigate major topics of interest and will be further divided into codes of significance. While each independent group will be analyzed independently, findings will be compared and reviewed against each other.

As research participants will have potential pre-existing relationships with myself, every precaution will be taken to avoid confirmation bias, and literal translation will be followed on all transcripts. As such, findings will be presented to my best ability without interference regarding oral responses. Findings will subsequently be presented in relation to the essential research questions mentioned in this work previously, and how they relate to students, families, and prospective teachers.

Future Considerations

As this research will be framed surrounding the involvement, importance, efficacy, and retention of male-identifying educators in elementary schools, the intended narrative proposed in this work will continue to have potential to be expanded upon. As a shortage of male teachers working with young children is not an issue limited solely to the Fraser Valley, continued academic research surrounding the absence of men in the younger grades will need to continue in a variety of ways.

As a result, the proposed narrative inquiry research, and interviews, may be expanded into continuing longitudinal studies further developing the commentary of individual students and families, highlighting continued relationships with male educators. While not included in the scope of this particular work, expansion may be possible, and certainly worth pursuing.

Summary

Socially constructed understandings of formalized public education permeate throughout the Fraser Valley, British Columbia and much of the world. As such, perceptions rooted in Constructivist paradigms widely exist surrounding the role of male

educators and their subsequent presence, or lack thereof in primary and elementary education. This proposed narrative inquiry intends to investigate this phenomenon and present the stories, conversations, and beliefs of vital members of the educational community.

Honest, direct appraisals and assessments of the current demographics working within primary education are very necessary, and this work intends to provide a transparent representation of these. With this, answers and insights will hopefully address the drastic underrepresentation of male educators with our youngest learners.

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Appendix A



Information Letter / Consent Form

April 12, 2024

Narrative Inquiry Study on Male Teachers and Role Models in Education in B.C.'s Fraser Valley

Who is conducting the study?

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As the research included in these interviews will be related to EDUC graduate studies at UNBC, this statement clarifies that any/all information collected will only be shared with the researcher, supervisors and Masters Defence Committee at UNBC. All information will not be made publicly available, nor will it be shared outside of this university environment.

Purpose of Research

You are being invited to participate in this research to help Special Education Graduate Students and their understanding of the role of male elementary teachers, in relation to their experiences in the public k-12 education system. This will be designed to inform

researchers as to the efficacy of specifically male elementary teachers and their roles in public elementary schools.

You should be aware that participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You are in no way obligated to participate in this research if you see fit.

You are free to withdraw from this study at any time. You are also free not to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable.

What will happen during the research?

If you choose to participate, the research will be conducted as per the following:

- 1) We will ask you about your experiences at your educational institution.
- 2) We will ask you to explain both the most positive and negative experiences in your individual education.
- 3) Add potential important information that you feel needs to be conveyed, that has not already been covered.

Risks or benefits to participating in the research

We do not think there is anything in this study that could harm you. Some of the questions we ask might upset you. Please let one of the study staff know if you have any concerns.

Some of the questions we ask may seem sensitive or personal. You do not have to answer any question if you do not want to.

If, at any point in the study, you feel uncomfortable or upset and wish to end your participation, please notify the researcher immediately and your wishes will be respected.

Confidentiality, Anonymity and Data Storage

Your anonymity will be respected. Information that discloses your identity will not be released without your consent.

Compensation

We will not pay you for the time you take to be in this study.

Study Results

The results of this research will be reported in an online seminar class and will be shared with the supervising professor in the UNBC Faculty of Education.

Questions, Concerns or Complaints about the project

If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the UNBC Office of Research at 250-960-6735 or by e-mail at reb@unbc.ca.

Participant Consent and Withdrawal

Taking part in this study is entirely up to you. You have the right to refuse to participate in this study. If you decide to take part, you may choose to pull out of the study at any time without giving a reason and without any negative impact on your [for example, employment, class standing, access to further services from the community center, day care, etc.]

CONSENT

I have read or been described the information presented in the information letter about the project:

YES NO

I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this project and to receive additional details I requested.

YES NO

I understand that if I agree to participate in this project, I may withdraw from the project at any time up until the report completion, with no consequences of any kind.

YES NO

I have been given a copy of this form.

YES NO

I agree to be recorded (*if applicable*).

YES NO

I agree that my name can be used (*if applicable*).

YES NO

Follow-up information (e.g. transcription) can be sent to me at the following e-mail or mailing address (*if applicable*):

YES

NO

Participant Signature

(or Parent or Guardian Signature)

Date

Printed Name of the Participant (or Parent or
Guardian) signing above

Appendix B



April 24, 2024

To whom it may concern:

Subject: Invitation to Participate in a Narrative Inquiry Study on Male Teachers and Role Models in Elementary Education in the Fraser Valley

My name is Brett Taylor, and I am an Education Graduate Student at UNBC conducting a narrative inquiry study on the efficacy of male teachers and their roles as potential role models in elementary schools. As a vital part of this research, I am extending an invitation for interested members of the Abbotsford School District community to participate in this study.

The objective of this study is to understand the impact and influence of male educators on elementary aged students social-emotional learning and overall well-being. Through narrative inquiry, we aim to promote insightful conversations from students, parent/guardians and prospective teacher-candidates to explore their experiences, perceptions, and insights regarding the presence of male educators in elementary schools.

Participation in this study will include the following:

- 1) **Student Participation:** Elementary-aged students in grades four and five will be invited to share their experiences and perceptions through group interviews and will have the opportunity to contribute via written narrative as well.
- 2) **Parent/Guardian Participation:** Parents and guardians of participating students will be invited to provide their perspectives and observations on the influence of male teachers in their children's education and social development.
- 3) **Teacher Participation:** Male teacher-candidates will have the opportunity to share their observations, experiences, and insights regarding their prospective roles as male teachers in an elementary school setting.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and all information provided will be kept confidential. The data collected will remain anonymous and used solely for university research purposes. Participation or non-participation will not affect student's grades within school settings.

Your involvement in this study would greatly contribute to our understanding of the importance of male teacher representation in elementary education and could potentially inform educational policy aimed at promoting diversity within elementary schools.

If you are interested in participating or if you require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me at ctaylor2@unbc.ca. I will provide any additional information and address any questions or concerns that you may have.

Thank you for your consideration in this study. Your support is extremely important to the success of this research.

Sincerely,

Brett Taylor

UNBC Education Graduate Student

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