

MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHER CANDIDATES: A NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON THEIR INITIAL CAREER CHOICE

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ABSTRACT. Do male teachers have a place in the elementary school? While several research and societal traditions suggest that males should be represented in the elementary classroom, contemporary demographic data dramatically indicate that few males are entering elementary education. Via an initial narrative exploration, a group of beginning male teacher candidates share their thoughts on their own initial career choices and speculate on their professional place in the elementary classroom.

RÉSUMÉ. Les enseignants de sexe masculin ont-ils leur place au primaire? Bien que plusieurs recherches et normes sociales semblent indiquer que la présence d'enseignants masculins soit essentielle au primaire, les données démographiques actuelles révèlent clairement que les hommes ne s'intéressent pas à ce palier du système d'éducation. Par le biais d'exposés narratifs, un groupe d'instituteurs débutants échangent des idées sur leur choix de carrière et s'interrogent sur leur rôle professionnel au primaire.

"I decided to become an elementary school teacher for many reasons . . . I love children and enjoy spending time with them." (Mark, personal narrative, 09-98)

INTRODUCTION

In 1972, I was hired by the Department of Education in the Social Sciences at McGill University to work with elementary preservice teachers-in-training. Although I may have had certain other academic and professional credentials and experiences, I was hired primarily because I was (am) a male. I was informed that as there were no male course instructors and field supervisors on staff at the elementary level, a sort of 'gender imbalance' existed. So, I became the 'token' male to redress this perceived institutional inequality.

Over my quarter century with the Faculty of Education, I have on numerous occasions been the only male professional educator in an elementary school. Additionally, I have often addressed whole groups of elementary teachers during professional day workshops with only a smattering of male colleagues in attendance. Seeing this imbalance so often began to make an impression on me personally and concern me professionally, resulting in a need to know more about male elementary teachers' career choice.

This initial study will, I hope, establish a narrative base of personal stories that will provide insights into the experience of the cohort of teacher candidates enrolled in an extended teacher education program at an anglophone education faculty in a French milieu. It may also be a useful comparison for other pre-service students and their teachers who face this professional conundrum.

Starting point: Reflections on my early experience

During my career in education, I have encountered a consistently small number of men who had opted for the elementary option. Until recently I really did not give their career decisions much thought, nor – strangely – did I dwell on my original motives either. At times, I would vividly remember my interview for my first full-time public school teaching position. In my mind, the overall interview had progressed well, and the committee (made up of two principals and one board official) were chatting with me in regards to grade level, school location and long-term plans. My clear desire for an elementary position was seriously challenged even though I had just completed an elementary training program that included lengthy stints of student teaching in elementary settings and had specifically requested an elementary posting. While I cannot recollect the conversation in its entirety or with absolute accuracy, the following brief questions and comments nonetheless form part of my reconstruction of this reality:

“Why do you want to *waste* yourself at the elementary level?”

“You know, some people may think that you are f-u-n-n-y!”

“What good is your masters degree in history at grade four?”

“Well, even if you want the elementary levels, the Board has a policy of never placing a man in the lower grades.”

“We never leave males – teaching males – longer than two or three years in elementary schools – our parents will talk.”

As I departed from the headquarters building, I felt satisfied that I had arranged for a two year position at Rosedale Elementary School. I would be assigned to a combined grade 4-5-6 family grouping and I would be able to follow some of these students for at least a couple of years. I had agreed to

this position on the understanding that I would be transferred (I distinctly remember that the word “promoted” was used to signal this level change) to a high school as a history specialist after this “probationary training period” in the elementary school. At that time, I did not feel uncomfortable with this arrangement and I certainly did not challenge the collective wisdom and knowledge of the two males and one female on the hiring committee.

In a special commentary written specifically for the work of Mayhew and Edwards (1936) chronicling his Laboratory School, John Dewey notes that it is sometimes easy, especially when reflecting over long periods of time, to “read into a statement . . . what one has learned in subsequent experiences” (page 11). Therefore, following the research suggestions of Ducharme and Ducharme (1996), one of my purposes in this study is to narratively explore the preliminary career choices for those few male teacher candidates who select elementary education as an initial career path. I have also chosen to do so by focussing on the brief span of time when these participants were still engaged in the initial preservice training process. Their experience, and my own, may contribute to the current exploration of gender issues in elementary schools.

Narrative methodological approach

The approach adopted in this study, as mentioned above, is a blend of personal narrative and a collection of the personal narratives of male elementary student teachers. (I also draw on other researchers’ work, especially published data on male elementary teachers.) This approach now has a long history in educational research; I will briefly review the tradition as a way of underlining the reasons for its value.

John Dewey (1891) observes that decisions and judgments cannot be made devoid from the emotions of the individual. He candidly suggests that “it is doubtful whether the most indifferent judgment is not based upon, and does not appeal to, some interest” (page 361). For this reason, Dewey strongly suggests that we should not be surprised by the emotional colouring of experiences such as my gender experience in elementary schools, but, rather, should engage and expose our gender and other biases so that self-reflection and further growth may occur. Josselson (1996) offers a more contemporary view of this Deweyan ideal:

In narrative work, we are engaged in an interpretive enterprise in every phase of the work. We recognize that there is no observer-free science and that accounts of objects are never independent of the observer. (p. xii)

Renate Schulz (1997) observes that research that focuses on the personal and emphasizes this personal process within teaching “provides a broad evidential base from which to draw conclusions about the practice of teaching” (p. 1). Sarason (1993) suggests that we cannot judge the measure

of a person unless “we know who they are; that is, in what relation they stand to schools and the decision-making process” (p. 18). Similarly, Kathryn Church (1995) broadly asserts that “research is composed of many stories” (p. 9).

Clandinin (1993) notes how narrative and the interchange of voice permitted her and her teacher candidates to engage creatively in a reflective and insightful process that explored their place within this teacher and teaching landscape. Paul Ricoeur (1985) suggests that “our own existence cannot be separated from the account we can give of ourselves” and that “it is in telling our own stories that we give ourselves an identity” (p. 214). Additionally, Clandinin and Connelly (1986) state that “narrative de-technicalizes the study of education and links it with other aspects of the study of human experience” (p. 385). Elsewhere, Clandinin and Connelly (1994) note that:

Story is, therefore, neither raw sensation nor cultural form; it is both and neither. In effect, stories are the closest we can come to experiences as we and others tell of our experience. A story has a sense of being full, a sense of coming out of a personal and social history. (p. 415)

According to Ricoeur (1976) a “miracle” occurs when experiences are shared, as it is in this sharing that true meaning moves from one to another. Acknowledging that one’s own personal and professional experiences cannot be given over to or intimately shared by another, the essential and contextual meaning can indeed be transmitted. Ricoeur (1976) notes that:

My experience cannot directly become your experience. An event belonging to one stream of consciousness cannot be transferred as such into another stream of consciousness. Yet, nevertheless, something passes from you to me. Something is transferred from one sphere to another. This something is not the experience as experienced, but its meaning. Here is the miracle. The experience as experienced, as lived, remains private, but its sense, its meaning, becomes public. Communication in this way is the overcoming of the radical non-communicability of the lived experience as lived. (p. 16)

The research method I have chosen to use allows, I believe, the closest approach to the reality that male student teachers experience when choosing the elementary sector and when working towards their professional qualification.

Before presenting their narratives, I set the scene with a reflection on views of male elementary teachers in the past half century (1946-1988). I then briefly discuss what can be learned from contemporary recent research on male elementary teachers’ numbers and career choices.

Views of male elementary teachers

Like many people, I initially accepted and participated in the institutional mythology and the research notions that were predominant in the 1960’s

and 1970's and that still linger to this day. Taken together, these various notions present a general package of ill-defined but somewhat appealing surface-level images that often suggested that the mere presence of a male in an elementary school would guarantee a changed, charged, and more intense atmosphere, though opinions seem to be divided on its effects.

- One would hardly imagine a situation in which a man would be in his element teaching a class of kindergartners. He would immediately become suspect. (Tubbs, 1946, p. 394)
- 'Who ever heard of a man working with babies?' . . . One [superintendent] gave me some confidential advice . . . [He] suggested that in future interviews it would be better not to mention first grade. He understood but was sure others would think of me as not quite normal. (Murgatroyd, 1955, p. 132)
- As men will be able to 'identify' more with adolescent boys, delinquency and other kinds of anti-social behaviour will decrease as more appropriate authority figure role models will be available to these potentially deviant young males. (Vairo, 1969)
- Putting a man, any man, in place of women in school will not do. A man who is less than a man can be more damaging to boys than a domineering mother. The chances of getting feminized men in the school are fairly good because those eligible and willing . . . are usually those who made it through a feminine school system without conflict or failure. (Sexton, 1969, pp. 29 - 30)
- With the disintegration of the traditional male/female urban family structure, coupled with the increase in predominantly female led single family structures, male elementary teachers will be able to provide a role and career model that may counteract and contrast this growing societal reality. (Kyselka, 1966; Johnston, 1970)
- Men are needed as primary teachers because "men make specific differences to a school . . . by being involved very actively with the children." (Kendall, 1972, p. 359)
- Simply put, "his presence" and "the contribution he can make" to the early childhood programs will improve the existing offerings (Sciarra, 1972, p. 190)
- It's so nice to have a young man around the class! (Mendelson, 1972, p. 281)
- Clearly, men will be able to 'identify' more with the boys and their specific presence will add an air of masculinity and perhaps even defeminize the elementary school environment. (Sexton, 1969; Lee & Wolinsky, 1973; Sugg, 1978)
- In the 60s, many women, enthralled with the male mystique, extolled the wonders of men as child care workers. With men in day care, miracles would be wrought. (Robinson, 1988, p. 56)

American and Canadian data: Male percentages

There is no question that male elementary teachers are a distinct minority within the realm of the North American elementary school. The National Education Association [NEA] survey has been conducted every five years for the past forty years and the most recent report (1997) compares similar data gathered since 1961.

According to the NEA (1997), males account for 9.1% of the total elementary teaching cohort. Although not specifically stated, it may be assumed that the NEA data, as it relates only to "public schools," excludes day care and pre-kindergarten positions. Unfortunately, a clear definition of "elementary" is not provided; however, the data breakdown suggests a 1 – 6 grade range. There is a striking statistic in the survey results that clearly indicates that the percentage of males who opt for elementary education appears to be in a steady and marked decline. The data clearly demonstrate that there has been a radical decline in absolute numbers over the last fifteen years. The NEA specifically noted this sliding phenomenon by stating that the "percentages of males at the elementary levels have declined steadily since 1981, dropping from 17.7 percent to 9.1 percent in 1996" (p. 76).

The Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) sponsored cross-Canada survey (King & Peart, 1992) was similar to the NEA survey in that the CTF excluded day care positions; however, a more detailed breakdown within the overall elementary range was provided. The CTF found that males made up an extremely small percentage of the teaching force in the kindergarten to grade three range. At 6%, males are indeed a minority; however, this figure radically jumped to 28% for males who were working in the elementary four to six grade range. Notwithstanding an elementary average percentage greater than the US figures, King and Peart note that "the gender distribution by grade group and age . . . clearly indicates that there will be very little change in the high ratio of women to men in the elementary system in the next decade" (p. 20); that is, into the middle of the first decade of the new millennium.

A closer look at the data obtained by King and Peart shows why the absolute number of males in the elementary grades began to decline sharply in the mid to late 1990's and will continue into the early part of the 21st century. There are significant numbers of current male practitioners at the elementary levels who are in the latter part of their careers. Therefore, without equal or greater numbers of new male elementary teachers coming into the system over the next decade or so, the overall percentage of males will continue to drop steadily and will begin to mirror the single digit figures now evident in the more recent NEA data. As an illustration, in the grade four to six range, 19% of the male teachers are 30 years old or younger, while 42%, more than double, are 51 or older (p. 21).

Male Elementary Teacher Candidates

More recent but less detailed information from the Canadian Teachers' Federation (1998) suggests that during the 1994 – 1995 school year, 22.7% of all elementary (defined as grades kindergarten to 8) teachers in Canada were male. It is important to note the significant decline in these figures only two years after the King and Peart data.

The most recent data from the Province of Québec (1998), as another example, shows that 2% of preschool educators are males and that 15% of elementary teachers are males. The Quebec data clearly support the general projection as described by King and Peart (1992) that the percentage of males in Canadian primary and elementary classrooms is declining and doing so at a significant and steady rate.

American and Canadian data: Initial career choices

The NEA (1997) also canvassed practitioners as to why they initially chose education as a career path. The following table illustrates the comparative results over the last 25 years. It is interesting to see how percentage levels have fluctuated over this quarter century.

TABLE 1. Principal reasons selected by all teachers for originally deciding to become a teacher, 1971-1996 (%)

REASON	1971	1976	1981	1986	1991	1996
Desire to work with young people	71.8	71.4	69.6	65.6	65.9	68.1
Value or significance of education in society	37.1	34.3	40.2	37.2	37.2	41.9
Interest in subject-matter field	34.5	38.3	44.1	37.1	33.6	36.5
Influence of a teacher in elementary or secondary school	17.9	20.6	25.4	25.4	26.8	30.5
Never really considered anything else	17.4	17.4	20.3	21.0	23.8	19.3
Influence of family	20.5	18.4	21.5	22.9	22.7	19.3
Long summer vacation	14.4	19.1	21.5	21.3	20.7	20.3
Job security	16.2	17.4	20.6	19.4	16.7	18.1
Opportunity for a life-time of self-growth	21.4	17.4	13.1	9.7	7.9	10.9

From: National Education Association (1997). *Status of the American Public School Teacher: 1995-1996*. West Haven: National Education Association (p. 59)

However, this data are somewhat lacking in precision in two areas, namely:

- 1) In some cases the respondents may well be reflecting over a lengthy time frame and it is entirely possible that their recollections may have been tempered by this longevity; and
- 2) None of the respondents are preservice education student teachers.

In a similar vein, King and Peart (1992, p. 31) also elicited initial career choices from their Canadian practicing teachers and their nine most-frequently noted choices is summarized in Table 2.

TABLE 2.

To work with young people	55%	To render an important service	36%
Interest in subject	35%	Job security	27%
Length of work year	21%	Salary	11%
Few alternatives	9%	Pension	7%
Short training period	6%		

Similar to their American colleagues, these respondents are practicing teachers who may well be reflecting over some time, and again, the respondents are not education teacher candidates.

Why do some males select the elementary option as opposed to the secondary option? Except via general questionnaire results and broad classifications, the research literature is somewhat sparse in regards to this question (Ducharme & Ducharme, 1996). Coulter and McNay (1993) conducted intensive interviews with seven men who were just beginning their careers as elementary school teachers. Their study primarily focused on the first year of teaching and not on their initial training program or their career choice. Furthermore, all of the participants had been trained via a short, intensive program. However, what is interesting is that a few of these men still believed in some of the traditional myths about special status surrounding male elementary teachers, and felt some frustration when local school boards did not immediately, in preference to their female peers, sign them up for elementary positions.

James King (1998) restricted his study of male teachers to the early grades of kindergarten to 3. King and his six participants identified a number of central and intertwined issues; namely, teaching as caring, teaching as a gender behavior, and (that apparently always underlying concern) sexual orientation in primary/elementary teaching. While providing much rich narrative data related to these larger professional and societal issues, King and his colleagues did not really focus on the 'why' of the initial career

choice. Notwithstanding this restriction, King presents an interesting study of males in the primary grades and draws some insightful conclusions:

Teachers can either be committed or uncommitted to their caring for children. Their construction of teaching as caring is based on their own philosophies about learning and about children. Biological sex as well as sexual orientation have evidently little to do with whether or not men are or can be effective as primary teachers. Socially constructed gender roles and their effective deployment *are* teaching. It is, therefore, others' use of their own perceptions of caring and their automatic suspicions about men's acts of caring that are the real problem with men in primary teaching. (emphasis in original, p. 139)

The Québec preservice education landscape

Until a few years ago, one could complete an eight-month preservice teacher education program at McGill University and become certified as a general elementary school teacher or a two-subject secondary teacher. Such intensive post-baccalaureate programs still exist at some Canadian universities, Toronto as one example, but are no longer available at any Québec institution. The Québec Ministry of Education (1992; 1994a, & 1994b) has recently inaugurated a new compulsory 120 credit post-collegial program which demands significant amounts of in-school experiences along with specifically defined professional and academic competencies.

Teacher candidates who enter the training programs now do so with the knowledge that the route to becoming a certified elementary teacher, for example, will normally take four years. Only in a few cases will it take two and a half to three years, for those whose previous university-level schooling allows them to obtain advance standing. No longer can teacher candidates view initial teacher training as any kind of 'holding pattern,' 'academic pause,' or 'something to do for a few months.' The new Québec program is designed to be a demanding and lengthy commitment with a great deal of in-school experiences (Bradley, 1995).

Clearly, with 700 hours (roughly broken down in the McGill scenario to approximately 100 days) of in-school exposure, these preservice teacher educators are acquiring a field experience that may still be "too structured, too focused, and too detached from the personal" but is certainly not "too short" (Knowles & Cole, 1996, pp. 654-655). Additionally, as a required element of the overall practicum experience, every elementary teacher candidate must spend time at both the early childhood (grades kindergarten – 3) and later childhood (grades 4 – 6) levels. Furthermore, as a specific component of the McGill experience, the year II early field experience of approximately fifteen days over one term occurs within a kindergarten setting. One has to wonder whether this extended preservice initiation will have an enrollment effect upon prospective teacher candidates, and specifi-

cally, whether potential male candidates will be attracted (or repelled) by this new preservice regime?

The route, then, is a long one and certainly eclipses the eight month (September to April) post-baccalaureate and other such intensive/compressed programs that are still available throughout North America at a variety of institutions. In this new teacher training landscape Québec candidates must be prepared to sacrifice a meaningful section of their young (relatively speaking) lives to attain this certification goal.

It is a truism that enrollment figures are always in flux. University students appear to drop out of and/or change programs and options with some regularity and often with great freedom. Therefore, it is sometimes difficult to achieve a precise and absolute figure related to actual student numbers. However, notwithstanding the difficulty of picking the right moment to ask the main frame computer to deliver the selected teacher candidate figures, the arbitrary date of March 10, 1998 was selected as being as reasonable as any other. Representing students enrolled in the elementary option of the new B. Ed. degree program, the Faculty of Education of McGill University had 404 students officially enrolled. Of these 404 students, 23 (or 5.69%) were male.

A cohort snap-shot

All 23 males officially enrolled in the elementary program were invited to attend several information sessions for this research. Following these gatherings, detailed explanatory letters were sent out along with 'letters of consent' to be signed and returned if the student was interested in participating in such a research project. At all times, I was conscious of Margaret Mead's (1969) ethical caveat; namely,

To fail to acquaint a subject of observation or experiment with what is happening . . . is to that extent to denigrate him as a full human being and reduce him to the category of dependency in which he is not permitted to judge for himself. (p. 375)

In this ethical environment, I clearly and often explained the nature of the research as well as its confidentiality. The safeguards were identified and the narrative role illustrated. An initial research cohort of 9 was established in the Spring/Summer of 1998 and 6 completed the narrative process by compiling a reflective journal chronicling their personal journey into the elementary education program. This narrative compilation occurred over the Fall and Winter terms of 1998 -1999.

As an aside, it is interesting to note that several of the male students privately spoke to me during this exploratory stage and informed me that they were having "second thoughts" about their elementary grades career choice. One student, in particular, emotionally described how his father and

his uncles had held a “family gathering;” collectively and forcefully informing him that they did not consider elementary teaching to be an appropriate vocation - for a male. Therefore, in deference to this family pressure that he felt he could not ignore, he was transferring to the secondary option the following semester and, therefore, declined to participate in this study.

As a beginning exercise and one designed to provide an overview snap-shot of this particular grouping of male preservice teachers-in-training, all nine initial participants completed a short anonymous questionnaire that was designed to be completed quickly. Additionally, it was hoped that such a questionnaire would provide some basic demographic data such that this small and particular research group might be generally compared with other groupings of elementary male candidates in other situations. This survey revealed the participant information shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3.

• Age:	The average age of the group is 26 years with the oldest at 34 and the youngest at 21.
• Marital Status:	All of the candidates are single.
• Entry Level:	Four of the candidates were admitted to the four year program while the other five brought in various combinations of advanced standing credits from other universities/programs.
• Graduation Dates:	Four of the candidates hope to graduate in 1999 with 4 others completing the degree in 2000 and the last in 2001.
• Languages:	All of the candidates speak the two official languages of English and French and others feel comfortable in Italian, Portuguese, and Greek.
• Ethnicity:	Notwithstanding all of the potential difficulties with such labeling, eight of the cohort classified themselves as ‘white.’

Individual narratives¹

a) RICK came into education from another career although he acknowledged that “teaching was something that I always wanted to do.” With a political science degree and several years of work experience behind him, Rick appeared to move into education for very personal reasons:

I have been coaching children in competitive soccer for many years. It’s something I love doing. I felt that in teaching I could make a career out of ‘coaching’ in an intellectual environment as opposed to the playing field. I have a good mentor in my father, a volunteer soccer coach for about twenty years. He instilled in me a need to give back to the community.

Expressing the view that he did not easily make this education choice, Rick voiced concerns about the monetary pay scale as well as the potential for

personal satisfaction and professional growth. Nonetheless, Rick showed his developing ethical framework when he noted that “another reason I decided to become an elementary school teacher is because I think I can have a significant impact on a child’s life. Being a male, I think I can bring a different perspective to the classroom.”

b) PATRICK “graduated (with a BA in history) in 1994 with the country in the middle of the worst recession since the 30’s, so there was not much call for someone with my ‘skills.’”

Seeing the writing on the wall, I decided it was time to study languages, and possibility have a little adventure. I soon found myself sitting in the Russian Consular offices in Ottawa requesting permission to study at Moscow State University to get a ‘reading and writing knowledge’ of Russian. I attended MSU during the first three months of 1995. After that, I decided to study French, so from September until May of the same year I studied full time at the University of Montreal.

Patrick notes that he entered elementary education as he thought that it would give him more “marketability” than just a secondary credential. Furthermore, he is quite ambivalent about a long-term career as an elementary teacher. He is “not sure which is my real reason as to going into teaching” and suggests that elementary education “is a young man’s game.” Notwithstanding his own uncertainty about his education career choice, Patrick notes perhaps sarcastically, that “if men knew how [much] fun it is to teach [in elementary school], there would be more men entering the profession.”

c) MICHAEL

I decided to become an elementary teacher because the job description interests me. Trying to help or make others understand new meanings, concepts, facts, etc. is in my nature. Teaching would give me the chance to put my talents into good use.

Similar to other participants, Michael made note of the differences that he perceived between elementary and secondary teaching. Notwithstanding the energy he perceives as being evident within the elementary landscape, Michael specifically notes that “I’ve always viewed elementary school as being largely responsible for setting the foundation for many aspects of a child’s life.”

Michael bases much of his decision for entering elementary teaching upon very positive role models in his own education past. In particular, he mentions a female grade six teacher who helped him overcome some academic difficulties, and a male teacher who interacted with the class in a slightly less than traditional way; for example, “by standing up in a chair and singing ‘I’m a little tea pot.’” It is clear that Michael’s positive elementary experiences were instrumental in directing him to his later career choice.

The audience that attracts me are children. I feel at ease with them. I often find their questions interesting and amusing. Sometimes what we think is simple and irrelevant and should never be asked produces the most interesting and captivating answer of all. I encourage all kinds of questions from children and never think poorly of any child who might ask the occasional 'bizarre' question.

d) **MARK** finds explaining his career choice harder than he first anticipated. "I decided to become an elementary school teacher for many reasons, but one that has leaped in my mind a lot has been I love children and enjoy spending time with them." Mark further situates his choice within a much larger landscape and somewhat philosophically muses: "Our job is a piece of a grand puzzle whose final goal is to create a well-mannered, civilized, and intellectual human being."

In a very practical and straightforward manner, Mark noted that he selected the elementary grades over the secondary levels because "I swayed away from the secondary route due to the lack of respect, discipline, and problems in secondary schools. . . . I also chose elementary school . . . feeling that it was a better route in getting a job." Somewhat forcefully and perhaps unconsciously acknowledging his mingling of philosophy and practicality, Mark states "I chose this field because I see children as a special resource and I want to be involved in this process."

e) **JAMES** came to McGill, like some of the other participants, after working "in the real world" for a number of years and after realizing that despite his undergraduate degree in mathematics, he really did not find fulfillment in the business sphere. James thought about a career at the secondary and/or collegial levels, but chose elementary primarily because "I feel more comfortable with children than I do with teenagers (especially grades 10 and 11 where I have observed that these adolescents are very peer orientated and sometimes rebellious to adults and authority. . .)."

Somewhat older than his peers, James is comfortable with his career decision and says "my interest in education is both intellectual and emotional." He finds the variety of courses as well as the various student teaching stints to be challenging and personally valuable as "so many questions [are] raised."

James is not immune to his minority position within elementary teacher training. "Some of my female colleagues here in the faculty of education are curious as to why I, a male, am interested in teaching children. This surprises me." It is clear that James is comfortable with his vocation as he usually responds to such inquires by noting: "I have explained to some of my curious female colleagues that I get along well with children, feel rejuvenated by their outlook and presence and am a teacher at heart. I don't believe there is any need to add anything else."

Notwithstanding his apparent maturity as well as his pleasure with the preservice training program,

I must say that I sometimes feel a little bit out of place when I look around in my classes and see so many females and so few males. Nevertheless, I feel that I am accepted here within the faculty and within the schools I have visited as part of the teaching stages.² This is very important to me. I know males who are elementary teachers and see nothing wrong with the career choice they have made.

f) MARTIN honestly places his career choice in a brutally practical perspective when he muses:

The big thing was that I had to go to school to have a job when I got out – a historian, a geographer, or an anthropologist are not considered jobs in my house simply because opportunities are limited in these fields. So my choices were narrowed down drastically – all I had left was law, social work, and education. The day that I read a brochure from McGill explaining that a social studies DEC [junior college program] led to Education was the day I started to dream of becoming a teacher.

Martin's elementary level program choice was based largely upon his own past experiences. He forcefully notes that "as soon as I thought of education, I thought elementary and definitely not secondary because I was myself a 'smart-ass' teenager and there was no way I wanted to deal with that as a teacher." Martin continued in his narrative to note that he did not choose elementary because of any great love for little kids but, rather, for a fear of older ones and their "delinquent behaviour!" It is perhaps interesting to note that Martin's current career choice is sometimes at odds with the perceptions of his peers, family, and friends.

I have never felt out of place when I'm around people in my field, be it in schools or at university, but I very often feel out of place when discussing my career choice with people outside the field (friends, family, acquaintances, etc.). Without trying to be dramatic, I have discovered that elementary education has practically no prestige as an occupation, a lot less prestige than secondary teaching, especially for a male.

Discussion

There are a number of general themes or strands that emerge from the commentaries of these neophyte male elementary teacher candidates. While it is inappropriate to read too much into these early narratives, it is nonetheless clear that a number of features are taking shape in this particular landscape. The following connected and intertwined trends seem worthy of further investigation.

First, there appears to be a perceived difference based on the past experiences of some of the education students themselves between adolescent and elementary learners; that is, it is 'easier' or 'less difficult' to teach elementary

pupils than secondary students. While Michael, Martin and James may have made clear this elementary-secondary dichotomy a number of the other candidates alluded to this youngster-adolescent split.

The second general trend to emerge indicates that a few of the teacher candidates view a teaching career as a short term, almost 'temporary' or 'transitional' job rather than a long-term vocation. A number of narratives note that some had come into the field in an almost 'searching mode' and Patrick's comment that teaching "is a young man's game" illustrates this position.

The third trend may seem to contradict the previous comment as some of the students appear to have made a clear second career choice; that is, they have moved into education after having attempted other avenues. For example, Rick and James worked "in the real world" before commencing their preservice program. It is interesting to note this oft repeated phrase indicating that teaching is not of the "real world", but rather an unconnected part of what might be linked to it.

Overriding these three interwoven strands, one can discern throughout the narratives a general view or fourth point that these potential male elementary teacher candidates simply "like kids." While Martin may have backed into the elementary grades in order to avoid the secondary levels, these males clearly and forcefully write about a delight in being around, reacting to, and reflecting on elementary-aged children and their learning environment.

These narratives must be viewed as initial, tentative, and questioning forays into this still relatively under-researched field. Some educational researchers insist that there is a clear need for more male elementary school teachers (Goodman and Kelly, 1988; Wood and Hoag, 1992). However, among other observers there appears to be some skepticism that mere male presence will actually accomplish much in regards to changed pupil perceptions and/or increased academic achievement. Allan (1993) goes so far as to suggest that repeated societal and professional calls for more males in elementary schools are largely based on mythology and folk tales and are unsupported by any kind of reliable research base. Hearn (1987) postulates that bringing more men into elementary schools might well have the adverse effect of extending men's power, control, and authority over women and over the elementary curriculum.

Sockett (1993) claims that men and women have different perceptions and aspirations, and these differing views have profound implications in regards to classroom practice, institutional structure, and professional relationships. Additionally, Coulter and McNay (1993) suggest that "placing more men in elementary teaching without asking why ignores complex questions about the structural dimensions of gender relations in schools" (p. 411).

Seifert (1988) muses that the mere absence of men in early childhood education has itself limited their influence on the development and evolution of primary care. He notes that there is a need for serious investigations into long term male influence on children at these early levels.

As Seifert says, many of the conflicting assertions about men's role and contribution in elementary education are not adequate unless well-supported by real evidence. However, we are facing a clear reality now: the stark statistics projecting the future. These demonstrate that North American elementary schools are becoming places where males will have no effective presence and no real voice. The almost total absence of male elementary teachers may have certain consequences for children, especially those who have no consistent male presence elsewhere in their lives. While mere presence is not enough – much depends, as always, on the human and professional qualities of the teacher – this imbalance is a feature of our schools we need to go on exploring as openly and courageously as possible, like the young male teachers who have been quoted here.

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NOTES

1. All direct quotes are taken from individual student narratives and journals and, at the request of the participants, their real first names have been utilized.
2. The French word "stage," roughly translated as a "period of time", has become incorporated within the Anglophone teacher candidate lexicon in Quebec and refers to any student teaching experience. Therefore, "Where have you been placed for your stage?" as well as "How is your stage going?" are common student questions in the hallways of our Faculty of Education.

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