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EXPLORING THE NARRATIVES OF EXPERIENCED MALE ELEMENTARY
SCHOOL TEACHERS WHO VOLUNTARILY DECIDED TO LEAVE THE
PROFESSION OF TEACHING

A Dissertation in

Learning, Design, and Technology

by

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Abstract

Male elementary school teachers in the United States are rare. Among the men who begin elementary teaching careers, many decide to leave the profession after experiencing the realities of life in that position. This qualitative study employed narrative inquiry coupled with thematic analysis to explore the reasons behind the participants’ life-changing decisions to leave their careers as elementary school teachers. Eight such teachers were extensively interviewed to acquire their thoughts and stories concerning their experiences in the job of teacher, and to explore their reasons and motivations for making the decision to leave their jobs and seek new careers outside the school system.

Applying the analytical process to the interview data, numerous themes emerged suggesting that these teachers’ dissatisfactions stemmed from three main categories: The economy, society, and the school system. Many themes fell within these categories, some of which are specific to men. Of particular note is that all of these men would have preferred to continue teaching had conditions been different or had particular events not occurred.

The results of this study provide insights from which administrators and policymakers can glean useful direction when making decisions about educational systems, teacher retention (of both sexes), and teacher satisfaction. It may also prove useful in teacher preparation programs and to working teachers who wish to work proactively to prevent, change, or avoid situations and conditions such as those described by the participants of this study. Education system reformers may also find useful insights to keep in mind during their design efforts.
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Chapter One: Introduction

School teachers play a vital role in American culture and hold a special place within the teaching profession. They often spend more waking hours with young, impressionable children than the parents of those children (Strauss, 2015). In many school districts, elementary students spend the entire school day with just one teacher, and an entire year in each grade, so each teacher has a great deal of influence over the ways the children in their care learn and grow. They teach children subject matter content from a multitude of subject areas, but there is also a hidden curriculum. Good teachers help children learn how to navigate social situations, deal with challenge and adversity, get their voices heard, handle emotions, interact with other children and adults, and develop physical control of their bodies. Not all teachers do these things well. But most of them say they want to be great (Johnson & Duffett, 2003).

Young students look up to their teachers as role models, mentors (Guerrero, 2012), mother- and father-figures (Teacher Certification), and sometimes even heroes (Belkin, 1972).

Given this potential for adulation, one might assume that teaching is a highly respected and desirable position to hold within a community and in the larger society. One would be mistaken.

The position of teacher is desired by many young people entering teaching majors at universities and colleges across the country; young people who believe it is a way to reach the next generation and impart wisdom and ultimately change the world through their efforts (Johnson & Duffett, 2003). That is until they start to do it.

Over sixty percent of education majors change majors before they graduate, realizing after getting involved in the major that teaching (or maybe college) isn’t for them (Chen &
Another twenty percent graduate with a teaching degree but never even try to get a teaching job. Among the remaining graduates who do start teaching, fifty percent of those people quit within the first five years (Ingersoll, 2012).

None of that bodes well for people entering the teaching profession, but hidden within these already grim numbers, one statistic seems surprisingly stark. Of all the teachers who stick it out and become practicing elementary school teachers in the United States, only 13% of them are men (The World Bank, 2014).

**The Problem**

There is something curious going on with young men and boys in the United States right now. It seems to start early. Boys, as a group, are not doing as well in school as girls. Young men, who have always been a rambunctious bunch, are more inclined than any time since World War II to quit school before they graduate (Lång, 2010). For a time after World War II, the United States had the number one high school graduation rate in the world. Today, it has dropped to twenty-second among twenty-seven industrialized nations (OECD, 2012). Some 1.1 million American students (both genders combined) drop out of school every year, but the percentage of boys is about 7% higher than the rate for girls (Editorial Policy in Education Research Center, 2010). When boys do make it through high school, they are no longer going to college in numbers equivalent to young women (Borzelleca, 2012). Some universities have even instituted gender-based affirmative action programs to try to enroll more men (Jaschik, 2006). Men expressing a desire to get married, as a percentage of the population, are at an all-time low, while women do not seemingly share this desire (Crouse, 2012). When reading the popular press, it seems there’s no end to the ways young men are making a mess of things for themselves and for the larger society.
It would be foolhardy to believe that any single cause is to blame for these conditions, but that eliminates no hypotheses. That these conditions exist is not in dispute. Finding convincing evidence for causes and deciding how to address them…that is where the debate lies.

Researchers, writers, philosophers and parents have hypothesized a host of possible culprits for this “boy problem” (Tyre, 2008), including:

- the increased use of video games (Hull, Brunelle, Prescott, & Sargent, 2014)
- the lack of unstructured play, especially outdoors (Juster, Ono, & Stafford, 2004). Children spend 50% less time in unstructured outdoor activities than they did in the 70’s.
- excessive screen time, which includes watching television, surfing the net, texting or messaging with friends, viewing pornography, etc. (Dunckley, 2014)
- increased use of plastic bottles for drinking (Sax, 2001). The contention here is that a lot of plastics are made of chemicals that mimic estrogen and those chemicals leech into the contents of plastic bottles, like soda and water, and make anyone who consumes them more feminine. This makes boys less boyish, and girls more womanly at younger ages.

Another hypothesized cause that led me toward this study is that there is a shortage of male role models for young men, especially in school where they spend so much of their time (Lyons, 2002). According to this argument, there is not much interaction in boys’ lives with adult men in any intentional or regular way (First things first, 2016). Right at the top of a list of reasons for this is a lack of two-parent households which at this time and in the U.S. means an increase in the incidence of single-mother households. There is also a lack of interaction with other peer and close-peer boys due to the aforementioned reduction of unstructured play.
An institution that plays a substantial role in nearly every child’s life in America, elementary school, is another place in which male role models are distinctly lacking.

To put it simply, there aren’t very many men teaching elementary school. Accurate statistics isolating elementary school teachers are difficult to find, but organizations that do make a claim indicate that males make up between 7-13% of the elementary teaching force of the United States, depending on the source (e.g. (Bolch); (The World Bank, 2014) respectively). This percentage has been falling for decades and is currently the lowest it has been since the 1950s.

In some parts of the country, school districts are experiencing dire teacher shortages (The San Diego Union-Tribune Editorial Board, 2017). Some states have resorted to recruiting foreign teachers because they can’t fill their teaching job vacancies (Brundin, 2015). In those cases, working to equalize the number of men in the teaching ranks with women would go a long way toward meeting the need. It might be the converse, that making the job sufficiently appealing that men would apply would solve the problem, but states don’t seem interested in doing that yet.

**Why is This Worth Studying?**

It has been proposed that it is important to have male elementary school teachers for the host of benefits it can bring to students. High-ranking among these reasons is that men can serve as positive role models for young boys and girls (Gormley & ebrary, 2012); (Dee, 2005), especially in places where a high percentage of students grow up with no father. Such places are easy to find. Over 30% of all children in the U.S. today have no father in the household (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). This number has been steadily rising since the sixties (National Center for Fathering). In some areas, the fatherless household percentage exceeds 50% (ibid). The problem
is so bad that there are non-profits in this country dedicated to teaching adult men how to be dads because they never had one to function as an example and don’t know what a good father does (Bishop, 2013).

Some argue that the increasing feminization of the elementary classroom negatively impacts boys, leading to their underachievement (Titus, 2004); (Ashley, 2003); (Skelton, 2002); (Johannesson, 2004), and that the dearth of men in the teaching ranks may be partially responsible for a higher rate of dropping out before graduation for boys than for girls (Chapman, Laird, Ifill, & KewalRamani, 2011). These kinds of things are hard to “prove” (in the laymen’s sense of the word) but Dee (Dee, 2005) is able to confidently state after completing multiple studies of classroom performance: “Simply put, girls have better educational outcomes when taught by women and boys are better off when taught by men.”

Coming in from a completely different angle are those who argue that there is a trend of over-prescribing attention-deficit drugs to boys and referring boys for special education and disciplining them for behavioral problems (D’Agostino, 2014). It has been argued that these trends are artificial and based on a failure of school personnel to recognize the ways in which boys tend to behave and accommodate them with developmentally appropriate scholastic environments and teaching processes. That line of argument continues by proposing that male teachers may have a more intuitive grasp of some of the physiological processes that some say underlie the behavioral differences between the genders seen in elementary school-aged children.

Many boys think that male teachers are better able to relate to them (whether that is true or not) and can more readily find shared experiences (McGrath & Sinclair, 2013); (McWeeney, 2014). Men can also show young boys that working is what grown men do, and that teaching is a viable career option for them. In addition to the benefit to boys, there is a case to be made that
improving the conditions of the job of elementary teaching and raising pay to such a degree that it would attract men “would positively impact the job for women as well” (Rich, 2014). Gender equity tends to benefit any formerly feminized profession (OECD, 2012).

If we, as a society, want to have men teaching elementary school, we should look into their reasons for quitting in the hopes of discovering whether there are things that could be done to reduce the exodus as well as make the profession more appealing to potential future teachers coming up the pipeline.

It’s important to note here that this dissertation does not intend to promote the idea of increasing the percentage of male elementary school teachers nor will it argue that men make better elementary teachers than women. There is no evidence to support the conclusion that adding male elementary teachers would result in improved educational outcomes. Rather, the decision of whether to increase the percentage of men in the elementary teaching force is a strategic one that needs to be made at the administrative and societal levels based on our national identity and values. Do we as a nation believe there is value in having men teaching our children from the youngest ages? Do we think teachers serve as more than dispensers of information to their students? Do we believe that there are societal benefits to having children of both genders witnessing men working and caring for children and being intelligent mentors? If the answer to any of these questions is yes, then this study may provide useful insights into what is driving men away from the classroom.

The Study

This study was designed to investigate deeply male teachers’ thought processes leading up to their decisions to quit the careers for which they trained and ostensibly expected to succeed. It is an exploration of the stories of a particular group of men who existed within a
particular set of conditions at a particular time in history. I have chosen to study men who worked within the educational system during this time period of purported masculine decline and who voluntarily chose to leave it because I think they are in the best position to understand how the conditions inside the system affected them, and how similar conditions might affect others who will find themselves within those conditions in the future. I will listen to their stories, analyze their motivations, and report important themes.

**Research Questions**

The following questions guide this study:

- What are the self-professed narratives used by former male elementary school teachers when describing the events and thought-processes leading up to the decision to leave the profession of teaching?
- Are there critical events within these narratives that serve as “the last straw” in pushing the men to leave the profession?
- Are there common themes that emerge from these narratives?
- What do these men perceive to be qualities of a good teacher and how many of those qualities do they think they possess?

**Limitations**

This study is an exploration of the experiences of a group of former male elementary teachers who made the decision to leave the teaching profession. It consists of their stories and methodologically-guided interpretations of their stories. These stories arise exclusively from those involved filtered through their own memories and possibly changed to suit their own desired narratives. They were spoken aloud in English to another human interviewer (me), after which they were transcribed (also by me), losing some degree of fidelity in the process, and
finally they were interpreted by a researcher (me again) with his own biases and worldview (which are elucidated below). These results should not be considered to be generalizable to anyone outside of the participants who provided the narratives for this study. They may, however, provide transferable ideas that could influence policy, workplace environments, and the administration of schools (or they may not). It may be helpful to the larger academic world and society as a whole when considering ways to change those conditions if that is something policy-makers and school administrators (and society) choose to do. The idea of transferability will be discussed below, in the methods section.

**Delimitations**

This section of the paper is designed to describe boundaries (or delimits) around the study so that the purpose does not expand or get lost. There are possible misconceptions about what a study like this can do and I would like to dispel them now before we begin. In an effort to demarcate the boundaries of this study thoroughly, this section details some of the things that this study does not intend to do.

- It does not intend to find the value of male teachers in the classroom.
- It will not compare male teachers to female teachers.
- It will in no way suggest that there is a problem with female teachers.
- It will not indicate that the stories of female teachers who decide to leave are different or less valuable than the stories of men who decide to leave.
- It does not intend to explain why there are so few male elementary school teachers.
- It does not intend to explain the effects of a shortage of male elementary teachers on students.
Theoretical Framework

The purpose of a theoretical framework or conceptual lens as it is sometimes called, is to provide a way of interpreting data that is collected for a study. The framework provides a structure for analysis, an explanatory power that can be used, at least initially, to begin to parse data for meaning and themes. Horner and Westacott, (Horner & Westacott, 2000) describe a theoretical framework as “a set of assumptions, an orientation toward specific problem solving practices, and a rule for how these problems should be approached and proposed solutions appraised.” Different theoretical frameworks put the analyst in different starting positions and provide different ways of looking at the data which, in the case of this study, were spoken narratives. But even before analysis in any study begins, it must be acknowledged that different frameworks can generate different research questions, interview questions, and even research methods.

The present study intended to seek and acquire insights into why each of my participants made a fateful decision that seriously impacted his own life. In order to understand why any individual person makes any particular decision, I propose we need to know four things:

- What motivates people?
- Who is this person?
- What is the cultural and historical context of this person’s development?
- What is the present situation?

I call these questions “behavioral-explanation questions.”

As a note, when I say “this person” throughout this paper, I am referring to whatever individual human being is considered to be the subject of investigation that the text is describing at that moment. Due to the nature of this study being about individual motivations, all
discussions will involve only one person at a time unless otherwise stated. “This person” is who I am talking about at that time.

If each of the above behavioral-explanation questions is thought of as a “problem” to be answered, then each of the questions requires a way of approaching problem-solving that addresses that question specifically. What that means is that my theoretical framework needs to address all four questions. No single theory does that so I will be combining several. There are certain underlying similarities between the theories that will likely reveal my ontological and epistemological stances as I bring each theory to bear on one of these questions. At the end of this chapter, I will unify them into one theoretically-supported process.

**Part One: What Motivates People?**

I find this to be the most interesting of my four questions from a theoretical perspective because it is the only one that requires a theory that delivers any kind of universally applicable predictive or explanatory principles without regard to context or individual. There is no subject here. Answering this question requires a theory that applies to everyone. That makes it contentious. Answering the other three questions requires contextually-dependent data collection, after which (hypothetically) universal theories can be applied. I have a preferred theory or combination of theories for interpreting the data collected to answer each of the other three questions. I’ll address those shortly.

The theory that I argue does the best job of explaining motivated human behavior in context is Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Since I am trying to understand why these men under investigation, my participants, quit their jobs, their careers, maybe even their passions, a lens that helps illuminate the core motivations of human behavior is well-suited to provide a foundation for my analysis.
Motivational Theory

Before getting into the details of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), I would like to take a moment to talk about motivational theory in a more general way. Throughout this paper, I will argue that motivatedness is a mental state (Legault, Green-Demers, & Pelletier, 2006). I want to keep the concept of the state of motivatedness separate from the concept of motivation, which is a force acting on a person. That force can be external to the person (usually called extrinsic motivation in the literature) or it can be self-generated (which is usually called intrinsic motivation), but the force is not the same thing as the state. Successful motivation makes a person motivated. Thus, though I am not fond of it, I will throughout this work use the word motivatedness to refer to the mental condition of being in a motivated state. Motivatedness is characterized by a willingness to act and is made visible by behaviors of curiosity and activity. Descriptive terms applied to motivated individuals include eagerness, care, ambition, passion, and dedication. These terms sound positive, but motivation is value-neutral. One could be dedicated to murdering someone or passionate about gluttony. Motivation researchers seek to discover the conditions that elicit the state of motivatedness or conditions that reduce or eliminate the force of motivation.

Every individual comes into this world as a biological organism (Olson, 2003) with a sensory system and a brain that has evolved to interpret the sensations the body receives. Each person develops and moves through life in a unique way, having experiences that are exclusively his or her own. No two people have the exact same life experiences, even twins. Just think of all the major differences between the factors influencing two individuals: parents, weather, nation, religion, diet, school, siblings, pets, what television shows are watched (if any), what sports are played, etc. The list of factors is quite literally endless. All of these different experiences are
what make us each unique. They also cause us to behave in different ways. Motivational research seeks to make sense of these different behaviors by understanding the reasoning (or motivations) behind them. Those parentheses in the previous sentence raise an interesting question about the relationship between reasoning and motivation but I think I will have to reserve those discussions for another paper. For this study, I am only discussing intentional behaviors, which means that applicable motivations cause cognition (thinking), and that cognition results in behavior.

The difficulty with motivational research is that those different experiences I mentioned above that make us each unique also make us very unpredictable. It seems as if there are simply too many variables and inputs influencing every outcome to be able to accurately explain or predict behavior.

But motivation researchers needn't abandon hope. There are some things that can be predicted because every individual is operating within a largely similar (and similarly limited) biological system - the human body, and the body exists in what I argue is also a largely similar reality. Most of us know how autonomic reflexes work. Our leg kicks without our brain’s input when our knee is hit by a doctor’s reflex hammer. Our hand jumps back when we touch a hot stove even before our brain knows it’s hot. Just as these exhibited behaviors are automatic and nearly universal in fully-functional adult humans, Self-Determination Theory indicates that some of our core internal desires are equally automatic, unchanging, and always present in nearly all individuals. Place these predictable desires in a predictable reality and it looks like we might approach the ability to predict and/or explain behavior. In fact, if one were to deny the possibility of accurately predicting or explaining behavior, then no research about motivation would ever need to be done or tell us anything useful.
**Self-Determination Theory**

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) has been widely and rigorously researched and reinforced for over forty years in laboratories, in social science settings, and in randomized trials. The “primary concern” of SDT research is “the well-being of individuals” (Deci & Ryan, 2002). At its most basic, SDT suggests that people make intentional decisions by thinking about how things will turn out and proceeding with the decision that they believe will produce the most satisfaction and/or avoid pain most effectively. That seems intuitively sensible, but it begs for a definition of satisfaction. As it turns out, defining satisfaction is the crux of SDT. Books have been written about this but I will attempt to summarize it here.

According to Self-Determination Theory, there are three overarching feelings that all humans desire and that when found or achieved, generate satisfaction which is itself a feeling. Decades of research strongly suggests that when it comes to self-motivation and personal well-being, humans seek and benefit greatly from feelings of **competence** (Harter, 1978); (White, 1963), **relatedness** (Baumeister & Leary, 1995); (Reis, Domains of experience: Investigating relationship processes from three perspectives, 1994), and **autonomy** (deCharms, 1968); (Deci E. L., 1975). It’s important to note that these feelings do not have to be “true.” One does not have to be competent in order to feel competent. It is the feeling that matters, not the reality. Let’s briefly dive into each of those feelings.

**Competence** - a feeling of capability, of being able to do what needs to be done. Competence is supported by optimism in the surrounding environment, reinforcement of success, and actually accomplishing tasks. It can be undermined by denigration, skepticism, fear, and failure.
**Relatedness** - I prefer the term “belongingness” but either term means to feel connected to other individuals, communities, family, team, coworkers, etc. To feel wanted. Relatedness is supported by visible evidence that others find one valuable or needed. Things to look for would include calls or communications asking for help or presence, a desire of others to be close, and actually being wanted. Relatedness can be undermined by being ignored, forgotten, or rejected.

**Autonomy** - means to be independent, able to do what one wants, within acceptable limits. Autonomy can be supported by providing options and allowing choices to be made, by providing flexibility in scheduling or deadlines, and by reducing arbitrary standards or rules. Autonomy can be undermined by allowing no options or flexibility in any activity or schedule, by defining who and what a person is, and by prescribing things.

In order to show how these feelings are supported or undermined throughout life, and how they affect feelings of satisfaction and happiness, I would like to draw a path through a representative human life and highlight some motivational forces that may turn out to be relevant to this study. I shall start at birth.

Deci and Ryan (Ryan & Deci, 2000) argue that intrinsic motivation is an evolved predisposition, a behavioral trait already in place before a fetus enters the world. This predisposition displays itself in young children as an “inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one's capacities, to explore, and to learn” (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Deci and Ryan arrive at this contention by meta-analyzing developmental studies, but anyone can observe the same things by watching healthy kids for a little while. Children display a “natural inclination toward assimilation, mastery, spontaneous interest, and exploration that is so essential to cognitive and social development and that represents a principal source of
enjoyment and vitality throughout life” (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1993); (Ryan R. M., Psychological needs and the facilitation of integrative processes, 1995).

With innate, universal, biologically predetermined traits like curiosity and spontaneous interest, what could go wrong? Well, “despite the fact that humans are liberally endowed with intrinsic (a.k.a. self-generated) motivational tendencies, the evidence is now clear that the maintenance and enhancement of this inherent propensity requires supportive conditions, as it can be fairly readily disrupted by various non-supportive conditions.” It probably won’t surprise many readers to learn that life is full these so-called “non-supportive conditions.” SDT has lots to tell us not only about the kinds of conditions that “elicit and sustain” motivatedness, but “subdue and diminish,” natural, wonderful, intrinsic motivation as well.

Let’s continue following our representative young child as he becomes a toddler. Conditions that support or don’t support motivation are often first encountered in the home. Parents who support the autonomy of their children, compared to controlling parents, have children who are more intrinsically motivated (Grolnick, Deci, & Ryan, 1997). That results in children who exhibit more exploratory behaviors (e.g., (Frodi, Bridges, & Grolnick, 1985)). A child whose autonomy is supported will appear to be more curious and active.

It continues in the schools. What kind of classroom management will our model child receive? “Teachers who are autonomy-supportive (in contrast to controlling) catalyze in their students greater intrinsic motivation, curiosity, and desire for challenge (e.g., (Deci, Nezlek, & Sheinman, 1981); (Flink, Boggiano, & Barrett, 1990); (Ryan & Grolnick, 1986)). Students taught with a more controlling approach not only lose initiative but learn less effectively, especially when learning requires conceptual, creative processing (Amabile, 1996); (Grolnick & Ryan,
1987); (Utman, 1997).” These studies (and many more) support the principle claims that SDT can accurately identify motivational and demotivational conditions in schools.

If our growing representative young person has the opportunity to go to college, the question of whether motivation-supportive or unsupportive conditions are encountered continues to loom large. It seems that college instructors who support feelings of autonomy and competence in their students have happier students and students who feel competent and autonomous get better grades (Black & Deci, 2000).

Perhaps our college student has a learning disability. Field, Sarver and Shaw (Field, Sarver, & Shaw, 2003) reference an earlier unpublished dissertation by Sarver that found that such students had higher GPAs when they were in environments that supported their self-determination. They summarized their new study by writing that environments supportive of self-determination for learning-disabled college students are “important to postsecondary success” and should be a “central organizing concept.”

The American Psychological Association sums up the value of SDT throughout the entire educational experience like this: “An enormous amount of research shows the importance of self-determination for students in elementary school through college for enhancing learning and improving important post-school outcomes” (American Psychological Association, 2004).

Speaking of post-school activities, it’s time we follow our fresh graduate out of the ivory tower and into a new life as an adult. SDT isn’t done yet. It has much to say about this next stage of life which also happens to be the context of this study, the workplace. Ryan and Deci reference another unpublished study by Baard, Deci, and Ryan (1998) that showed that “employees' experiences of satisfaction of the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the workplace predicted their performance and well-being at work” (Ryan & Deci, 2000).
In another study that examined daily variations in well-being, Sheldon, Reis, and Ryan (Sheldon, Reis, & Ryan, 1996) showed that “within-person daily fluctuations in the satisfaction of autonomy and competence needs predicted within-person fluctuations in outcomes such as mood, vitality, physical symptoms, and self-esteem.” Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, and Ryan (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000) found that variations in the fulfillment of each of the three needs (competence, autonomy, and relatedness) independently predicted variability in daily well-being. Both of these studies support the view that “basic psychological needs are determinative with regard to optimal experience and well-being in daily life” (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Deci and Ryan focus in their studies on the conditions that influence feelings. Some other researchers focus on people. One thing that becomes clear when one examines the literature of people in the workplace is that for a lot of employees, work is generally unappealing. Ressler and Thompson try to explain the blunt reality that many workers face on the job by trying to answer the age-old question in the title of their book of Why Work Sucks (Ressler & Thompson, 2008). As detailed in their work, a “controlling boss” (not supporting autonomy) might expect employees to stay late to show their dedication (again with the lack of autonomy), and then deride them for not meeting expectations (undermining competence).

It seems that SDT can help identify underlying motivational forces that affect behavior throughout the life span. I believe it to be a useful tool for understanding people and that’s why I used it as my theoretical framework for the analyses in this study.

**Why is SDT the right choice for this study?**

Since the key question of this dissertation is about why people make hard decisions to drastically change their lives, it seems appropriate to me to use a theory that helps illuminate that
process. There is without a doubt some kind of motivational (or demotivational) set of conditions or series of events that causes these men to make the momentous decision to quit their jobs. It seems likely that SDT can help identify and classify such conditions if I am able to acquire sufficiently detailed stories from my participants. Ryan and Deci (Ryan R. M., 2011) say that “SDT has been able to identify several distinct types of motivation, each of which has specifiable consequences for learning, performance, personal experience, and well-being.” It seems hard to imagine that some of these motivation types will not be revealed by my participants during our interviews. If I can identify them, it may be possible to connect them to the participants’ eventual actions. SDT articulates “a set of principles concerning how each type of motivation is developed and sustained, or forestalled and undermined,” principles I predict will be indirectly described in the narratives of these teachers. Quitting a career after getting a degree to prepare for it seems likely to be the result of strongly demotivational conditions in the workplace, and again SDT should function as a blueprint for these conditions because it helps to illuminate the conditions that instigate and aggravate “passivity, alienation, and psychopathology” (ibid)

To sum up, I’m using SDT as my theoretical framework because I hypothesize based on my literature review that some of the reasons my participants quit teaching have to do with failures of the workplace and the outcomes of work (like pay) to satisfy the three basic needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy.

**Part Two: What is the Cultural and Historical Context of this Person’s Development?**

Now I’m going to complicate things. It is important to note that while SDT is excellent at explaining the underlying factors that motivate individual human behavior, their theory does not attempt to explain the existence of environmental and cultural conditions in which motivations are manifested. In other words, SDT does not address the question of “how the world got this
way.” That brings us to the next question necessary for explaining individual human behavior: What is the cultural and historical context of this person’s development?

There are pressures on every individual in the present from outside forces like family, friends, and co-workers, among countless others, but we need to remember that those pressures have been developed over many years within a larger system of culture that is defined by social expectations and mores. Cultural pressures, as you might imagine, exert a strong influence on how people respond to different circumstances. Add to that the exacerbating fact that people can exist within many cultures simultaneously. For example, a single individual might be part of a national culture, a religious culture, a familial culture, a culture based on an ethnic heritage, a work culture, the culture of a social club, and the culture of an athletic team. Each of those cultures may push a person to act in different ways.

I’ll draw out a short narrative sketch for clarity.

Imagine that a man brings his future wife into a somewhat shady bar that is nonetheless famous for its tasty food. The couple is enjoying drinks together when a bothersome brute looking to cause trouble insults our protagonist’s female friend. For our protagonist, the urge to defend his future bride’s honor and assert his superior masculinity provide motivation enough to cause him to take a swing at the insulter after which a brawl of epic proportions breaks out.

Now imagine an identical man with an identical lady at an identical bar encountering the exact same scenario except this man was raised in a different family, perhaps in a culture that values peace and humor over violence and honor. Instead of punching the jerk, this guy diffuses the situation with a funny, self-deprecating retort after which he quickly ushers his date to a different restaurant where they have a lovely meal together.

Why do these two men behave differently when confronted with the exact same scenario?
It has to do with their individual histories. Those histories without a doubt contain different experiences and these men have been taught different values from their parents, cultural leaders, and institutions (like schools and churches). How and when did those values originate, why were they passed down through time, and how did our two protagonists learn the different values that resulted in their very different behaviors? I believe it is important to attend to these questions in my analysis, and that requires me to add the next level of theory to my theoretical framework.

**Sociocultural Learning**

There are two concepts raised by the above comparison of character behaviors: Learning and History.

The first question is how did these men learn? We don’t need to get into how they learned values yet. The question is how do they learn anything? I believe this question is answered by Socio-Cultural Learning Theory. Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky introduced the world to a theory of the process of learning (Vygotsky, 1978)\(^1\) that has come to be described as sociocultural and I argue that it is the most sensible of many learning theories. Perhaps because Vygotsky never named his theories, the tenets and processes with which they are constructed have come to be called different things by different groups of people, among them Cultural-Historical Psychology (Yasnitsky, van der Veer, & Ferrari, 2014), and Sociocultural Theory (John-Steiner & Mann, 1996). For the purposes of this dissertation, I will use the term sociocultural to describe any Vygotskian approach, and that adjective can be added to the term

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\(^1\) The citation dates of all of Vygotsky’s works are decades or half a century later than when the works were written because Russia in the 1920s was repressive and isolationist, causing Vygotsky’s works to languish, unrecognized until they were translated in the 60s and 70s, and brought to the West. Some works still remain to be translated.
“learning theory” or “development theory” depending on exactly which part of Vygotsky’s works are being referenced.

The foundation of this learning theory rests on the dynamic interdependence of social and individual processes as they swirl together to facilitate the development of knowledge within the individual. Vygotsky was the first (known) author to reject the strict subjectivist and behaviorist approaches that were popular at the time of his writing (late 1920s and early 1930s) and instead described a process of learning and language acquisition-and-use that combined the two.

Vygotsky proposed that we are affected by our environment as the behaviorists said, but we also interpret that environment through our senses and brains, and our interpretations are colored by our cultures and the languages we know. To me, this appears to be a rejection of dualism; of the Cartesian dichotomy of mind and environment. I prefer to look at the world the same way.

Another thing Vygotsky argued was that history cannot be ignored. Culture does not exist only in the now. It has evolved through time, which is, in Vygotsky’s thinking (and mine) history. Anything that happens or changes through time is part of the historical record that impacts the present. As he writes it, “the historical (that is in the broadest sense of history) study of behavior is not an auxiliary aspect of theoretical study, but rather forms its very base. (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 64-65) (emphasis added).

These elements; history, culture, and his version of sociocultural learning, are the aspects of Vygotsky’s approach that I am most interested in for the purposes of this dissertation.

To sum up this section, what I am arguing is that it is impossible to fully grasp individual motivation without considering the elements of culture and history. I agree with Vygotsky’s contention that all learning takes place within culturally mediated environments that have been shaped by historical forces of all kinds.
Part Three: Who is This Person?

The cogitating “self” that is developed through the process of learning over time by any given human being is an identity.

Identity

The concept of identity is something that has been discussed by Western philosophers since the dawn of the field including Plato (Gerson, 2004), Descarte (Descarte, 1641), and Locke (Locke, 1948), among almost all other well-known thinkers. I don’t wish to engage with that discourse here, but I believe an understanding of the meaning of identity (as I see it) will prove helpful in describing the factors that influence behavior in the present, including the behaviors of my participants. When I discuss identity, I am less interested in the philosophical questions of the ages (like arguing about psychological continuity or immaterial souls), and more interested in practical, functional explanations of how people develop their enduring self-concepts and how they control and are controlled by their environments based on their identities. For the purposes of this dissertation, I define identity as a collection of personal features, characteristics, and abilities that define a person’s self-image. In short, a man’s identity is what he thinks himself to be. The key here is that an identity is created by and held within an individual and applies only to that person. It is not what others believe a person to be nor is it inherently outwardly observable. Parts of it may not even be true. For example, one might identify as a good singer or athlete despite a glaring lack of evidence to support that opinion.

Identity theories seek to understand how a person forms his or her own identity, or, according to some theorists, how culture forms an individual’s identity. I am not using any single identity theory because I haven’t found one that sufficiently addresses what I consider to be all of the elements of identity development and maintenance placed in context, or what I will call
identity-in-practice. Another way of thinking about identity-in-practice is by asking “what are the outwardly observable evidences of a person’s identity?” I want a theoretical framework of identity that answers that question. In my efforts to create one, I will strategically combine elements of several identity and developmental theories and apply them when they appear to be relevant to my interviews or analysis.

There are three authors who address identity in ways I find useful for this study. The first is again Vygotsky, who discusses psychological development as an inextricable part of his learning theory in a way that can be extended to address identity-in-practice. In some of his writings, he makes the claim that community and language are integral to the process of meaning-making. Unlike Piaget (Piaget, 1959) who theorized that thought came before language and that language can be used to verbalize thought, Vygotsky proposes that community and language are not simply tools the individual uses to make meaning, but they are the meaning. In his conception, language is thought (once language is learned). My interpretation of this work as it relates to identity development is that the environment and culture and language in which children learn and grow influence greatly (possibly exclusively) what children think about, and also guide the very process of how they think. The result of these processes will undeniably be an identity of some sort. What sort of identity is dependent on the infinite inputs to which the child is exposed, which Vygotsky asserts are strongly shaped by culture, history, language, and the tools of the culture, all of which have their own long arcs of development. Bronfenbrenner makes substantially the same argument (and much more extensively) in his description of what he calls his Ecological Model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 2009). He describes the environment as much more than the place that surrounds a person. It is like “nested dolls,” he says, in that there is always another layer larger than the last. While I agree with Bronfenbrenner,
I’m going to “stick with the one what brung me,” Vygotsky, because of my familiarity with his work, and the fact that he wrote his theories more than half a century before Bronfenbrenner. I can grasp the doll metaphor as it relates to physical space being made of ever larger environments, all of which exert pressure on an individual, but my conception of the multifaceted environment of life is more like thousands of strings that all meet (and let me switch to the second person here) at the “knot” of you. Every variable in your life is a string. There’s the family string, the culture string, the genetic string, the language string, etc. They are very long strings that wind off into infinity before and after the knot that is you. You don’t really know where each string came from but it’s tied up in you whether you like it or not and it brings everything with it that it has ever encountered. You can’t control which strings are in your knot. For example, maybe you don’t like your language. You can learn a second language, but can you forget the first? (Perhaps I will call this Vygotskian String Theory.)

Whatever it comes to be called, I summarize Vygotsky’s contribution to my identity theory like this: “the sum-total of a person’s experiences is responsible to a very large degree for making that person who they are.” The reason I need other contributors is to fill the remaining percentage of the whole that “to a very large degree” doesn’t fill.

The second scholar who provides interesting insights that I can apply is Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (Bakhtin, 1990) who wrote persuasively about the idea of authorship (which I interpret in a way that allows me to discuss identity development as the authorship of the self). Others, such as Cresswell (Cresswell, 2011) have made similar arguments in greater detail. Something Bakhtin brings to the table in this area that I think Vygotsky does not address is the idea of intentionality of identity authorship. Bakhtin proposes that the individual
can innovate changes to identity within limits and rebel against imposed directives in ways that I find both compelling and appealing (despite him being nigh on inscrutable in doing so).

Finally, the third contribution I import to complete the construction of my identity theory is the idea of possible selves, introduced by Markus & Nurius (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Thinking of possible selves one might become or want to avoid becoming is a future-orientation that Markus and Nurius argue influences behavior in the present. I agree with them. Frazier and Hooker (Frazier & Hooker, 2006) detail decades of research surrounding the effects of possible selves on adults and the results convince me that there is value in adding this aspect of identity to my overall approach. The new idea this concept provides is that we don’t just think about how we want to change who we are, but rather we think about what we want to be in the future and make changes in the present that work toward that future identity. This approach is the most goal-oriented and forward-looking identity development path of the bunch.

Each of these theories provides a description of identity development that I believe is accurate but incomplete. By combining the three, I feel like I can address almost anything I might encounter on the spectrum of identity-related motivations that could be expressed by participants; those are sociocultural development of identity in context, the ongoing struggle to innovate and author one’s own identity and journey, and the ways our thinking about our future selves shape those efforts. In more direct language, I am asking my data to help me answer the following questions of a hypothetical male research participant: “Who is this man? How did he get this way? What is he trying to change? And what does he hope to become?”

**Identity, Motivation, and Behavior**

Now to bring it all together. Our identity shapes our behavior and our behavior is shaped by our motivations. My goal is to understand how.
By assuring that I am thoroughly accounting for the cultural and historical context of my participants with my unified identity theory, I can apply Self-Determination Theory in a way that will be more powerful than using either approach alone. Let me apply this process to my original four questions of behavior-explanation and now answer them:

**What is the present situation?**

First, I need to fully understand the context of the present in which any behavior takes place, or if researching the past to understand that context. That requires an assessment of environmental, social and historical conditions of the context without regard to the individual. What are, or were, all of the factors exerting influence at the time of the exhibited behaviors?

**Who is this person?**

Placed within the environment described by the previous answer is an individual who exhibits an identity-in-practice, which is to say the identity - as it is at this moment - affecting cognition. This person’s identity has been socioculturally developed, has possibly been innovated independently, and is oriented toward what it wants to be in the future. An alternative version of this question would be “What is he like?”

**What is the context of this person’s development?**

In order to accurately assess or predict the behavioral outcomes of this individual’s cognition, that in turn requires an awareness of the specific process of this person’s identity formation through time within the environmental, social, and historical context that also changed through time. This could otherwise be described as the sum-total of this person’s life experience. But remember that the sum-total of life’s experience is only mostly responsible for who a person is.
What motivates people?

Once all that is accounted for, I can then overlay all relevant motivational factors that might be in play, the overarching list of options being provided by SDT, and begin to make connections between those motivations, the context, and the identity-in-practice. If done well, those connections will reveal which motivations won (or will win) the day, ultimately explaining why a person behaved (or will behave) in a particular way. I call this ideal state “complete awareness.” It is an ideal, which means it can only be approached, never attained.

This all may sound daunting, but if it can be done, we can actually be pretty darn good at interpreting and predicting human behavior. For the most part, we simply haven’t developed the observational tools, computational power and analytical insight to collect and successfully incorporate all the inputs into our equation. I’m quite certain many people will find this claim outlandish. That’s okay. I expect that, in time, I will be proven correct.

Let me tell a true short story from my own life to help illustrate this point.

I was in the kitchen of our family home with my daughter, who was a teenager at the time. It was after work, around dinner time. I had decided to eat a week-old container of Hamburger Helper that was in the fridge because I knew that no one else would eat it. Neither my wife nor my daughter like Hamburger Helper when it is fresh, let alone when it is on the verge of being moldy. I considered this a sacrificial act. I was taking one for the team. I had reheated this delicacy in the microwave and was discussing my daughter’s day with her as I leaned against the kitchen counter, eating. She had put her own instant mac and cheese bowl into the microwave and was waiting for it to ‘ding.’ Just as I was finishing the last forkful of Hamburger Helper, we heard the garage door open, signaling the arrival of my wife home from work. Our garage is on a lower level of the house than the kitchen, so my wife would be coming up the stairs after parking the car. Now, you have to understand that we also had fresh,
homemade, shepherd’s pie in the fridge from the night before and my wife loves shepherd’s pie. It’s one of her favorite comfort foods. It can hardly be overstated how much she looks forward to eating our special, custom version of shepherd’s pie.

I had noticed when I took the aging Hamburger Helper out of the refrigerator that it was in the same kind of glass storage container as the one holding the fresh and delicious shepherd’s pie. I looked at the now-empty container in my hand and I said to my daughter “Oh boy. Mommy is going to come up the stairs, see this empty bowl in my hand and gasp in disbelief, after which she will accuse me of stealing her dinner; the dinner that she has been dreaming about all day. I’m not gonna say anything, but I will look around guiltily. She will then notice that the color of the residue in this bowl is not quite the right color to have been shepherd’s pie, after which she will rip the refrigerator door open and see the shepherd’s pie in there. She will then say ‘Oooookay.’”

I then added as an afterthought “at which point you will laugh.”

What happened next was a memorable series of events. My wife came up the stairs, saw me holding the empty glass bowl with a fork in my mouth, and she gasped. “You ate my shepherd’s pie?” she exclaimed, deeply hurt. I didn’t say anything, but looked around guiltily. She then approached me and stuck in her head near the glass bowl in my hand, then quickly turned to the refrigerator and pulled the door open. She immediately spied the shepherd’s pie in there and said with relief “Oooookay.” Then my daughter burst out laughing, which only made her laugh more when she realized that she too had fulfilled my prediction.

The events in this story were made possible because I have been in a relationship with my wife for over 25 years and I raised my child from birth to adolescence, with most of her younger years being spent with me as her stay-at-home parent. Suffice it to say I know both of them very
well. I regularly shock my wife by explaining my daughter’s motivations for seemingly strange behavior, after which my daughter independently confirms my explanations.

I admit that it is not likely that we can acquire this depth of contextual and historical detail by interviewing people a couple of times or observing them for a few days or even months, but the point is that with enough data, and enough insight, we can in fact accurately interpret and predict behavior and we can understand the motivations behind it. For this dissertation, I am only interested in interpreting motivations (mostly unspoken), but my argument here is that if we can accurately interpret motivations, we can also predict behaviors. An accurate behavior prediction is simply a reverse-engineered accurate behavior interpretation. Yes, it is another step forward, but not an impossible one.

I mention all this not to start a debate about free will or the perils of a Minority Reportish future, but because I believe I will have an interpretive advantage in the present study, bringing me closer to the ideal of complete awareness. I deeply understand the culture of my participants and the culture and history of the present context, that being the American education system. I will never understand my participants’ histories to the same degree as I understand my family’s but part of my reasoning for researching a question involving American men who fall within an age range similar to mine is because I believe I am naturally well-equipped to analyze the stories of such men. It’s not much of an intellectual or empathic stretch for me to get into their headspace. Additionally, I have a critical understanding of the culture and history in which they grew up, formed their identities, and made the decisions that are under investigation, because I am a man who grew up in that time and culture too. I have also studied the culture academically (both sociologically and historically) so I think I can come at this study from both an intuitive and an educated perspective.
In short, I believe that applying the motivational factors described in Self-Determination Theory to the sociocultural context of the American educational system, paying special attention to the identities of my participants as developed through time, has paid dividends during the analytical phases of this research.

**Summary of Unified Theoretical Framework**

We are individual biological beings made of complex systems that have been evolving since before the dawn of human civilization. Every mentally functional individual develops an identity within a culture that has itself developed over millennia, bearing the marks of all the geographic, economic, religious, political, climatic, and untold numbers of other forces upon it. Each culture stamps those forces on every identity forged within it. These external forces combine with the identities contained in our biological systems and we get the present conditions under which any individual human behavior is exhibited. In any situation requiring action, numerous motivational processes come into play and each of us reacts to those situations in ways shaped by our biology and our cognitive development within a culture. Meanwhile, shockwaves big and small originating from events that happened from prehistoric times all the way to the present continue to echo through our collective experience, sometimes affecting our behaviors in unexpected and uncontrollable ways.

These are the theoretical considerations I balanced as I undertook this study.
Chapter Two: Review of Literature

In this chapter, I will attempt to do the following:

- broadly contextualize issues of teacher gender in the American educational system since its earliest days
- discuss what we know about the reasons teachers voluntarily quit early
- briefly explore how “burnout” affects people in any kind of profession
- briefly discuss masculinity in America

Historical Perspective of Gender in the Teaching Profession

The U.S. is a white-male dominated society with a history of oppression and subjugation of women and minorities. Women’s rights only came to the fore relatively recently, and are in fact still under assault by conservative legislators. This history plays a part in the development of the conditions under which we now live and under which modern education evolved. Women have had to fight for acceptance, equal pay and equal rights from the earliest days of America right up until today, but male teachers have an unusual place in this story.

“The community can never know the teacher because it insists upon regarding him as something more than a god and something less than a man. In short, the teacher is psychologically isolated from the community because he must live within the teacher stereotype. The teacher stereotype is a thin but impenetrable veil that comes between the teacher and all other human beings. The teacher can never know what others are like because they are not like that when the teacher is watching them.

It has been said that no woman or no negro is ever fully admitted to the white man’s world. Possibly we should add men teachers to the list of the excluded.”

Observations on the Teacher’s Status in the Community, from Willard Waller in The Sociology of Teaching. (Waller, 1932)
Yikes! Waller just compared the plight of male teachers to the plight of the negro and to women…and this was at a time when women had only recently acquired the right to vote, and civil rights for African-Americans were still decades away. Could a profession really affect a person like switching genders or becoming a member of an oppressed minority?

Teaching by either gender has never been a highly respected job in the U.S. To whit, this was also written in 1932:

“Concerning the low social standing of teachers much has been written. The teacher in our culture has always been among the persons of little importance, and his place has not changed for the better in the last few decades.”

Also, teaching has not historically paid well in the U.S. This is from the same essay from 1932, but could just as easily have been written today:

“…the social standing of any profession is a pretty accurate mirror of its economic standing…therefore the low financial rewards of teaching are a sufficient cause of its being considered one of the less honorable pursuits.”

It seems evident that teaching as a career takes a special kind of person and an even more special kind of man. Prospective male teachers have to look past the obvious societal pressures and pursue their desired careers anyway. Some do. Then they still quit. Let’s look at some of the factors influencing the present.

**Quitting**

Teachers quit for a host of reasons. Among these are “role overload” (handling what teachers perceive to be unnecessary administrative and political responsibilities), low salaries relative to the demands, lack of parental support, student behavior issues, and large class sizes (Perrachione, Peterson, & Rosser, 2008). Sargent (Sargent, 2001) details problems faced by
working male teachers, including fears of being labeled homosexuals, accusations of pedophilia, and unwarranted expectations that men serve as strict disciplinarians and father figures.

Jumping up from the individual to the level of culture, literature suggests that there is a concept called hegemonic masculinity or normative heterosexual masculinity that may play a role in pushing men out of the profession (e.g. (Sargent, 2001)). In a nutshell, this means that there is one culturally acceptable vision of what an American man should be and being an elementary school teacher does not mesh well with that vision. This line of thinking has been around for quite a long time, even from someone as venerable as the grandfather of the American public education system, Horace Mann:

“All education, then, I say emphatically is women's work; the domain of her empire, the sceptre of her power, the crown of her glory.” (Mann, 1853, p. 82)

So on one side of the fence, there is an opinion that real men can’t or won’t be teachers because teaching little kids is “women’s work” (Williams, 1993) while on the other side the thinking goes that if a man is going to be a teacher then he darn well better be a real man.

“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 domineering mothers.” (Sexton, 1969, pp. 29-30)

It’s not easy for men to walk this tightrope.

While it’s true that in the ensuing years since the above exhortations were written, our culture has become less critical of men who pursue feminized professions and gay people in general (Loftus, 2001), the literature suggests that those men who do choose to teach elementary school still face numerous obstacles to a satisfying career experience.

In 2003, the National Educational Association research division conducted a survey (NEA, 2003) asking former teachers to explain what they found objectionable about their
teaching jobs. The stated complaints were not terribly surprising. They included (as paraphrased by me):

- Government mandates are annoying and unachievable
- No one supports me
- Some students are pains in the ass
- The pay is too low for the amount of suffering involved
- There is a lack of influence and respect

A lack of respect? Perhaps these young teachers should have read that letter from 1932 by Waller. He warned them. Seems not much has changed.

In their new non-teaching jobs, former teachers claimed that some things they liked better included:

- Recognition and support from managers
- Influence over workplace policies and practices
- Autonomy over own work

These are interesting observations in light of my explicated theoretical framework in chapter one. All of those reasons fall under one of the “three needs” described by Self-Determination Theory. Recognition creates feelings of competence and relatedness, influence creates feelings of relatedness and autonomy, and “autonomy over own work” is pretty straightforward!

Salary was also pretty highly correlated with staying or leaving (NCES). The more the teacher gets paid, the more likely they are to stay. Shocking.
**Burnout**

Sometimes work is more than just unpleasant. It is physically depleting. It’s mentally taxing. It causes depression.

This is burnout. The term was coined in the 1970s by psychologist Herbert Freudenberger (Freudenberger, 1974). It was a popularly discussed idea because people seemed to recognize themselves in the descriptions of the condition.

Among the symptoms are:

- Cynicism of work
- Avoidance of work
- Irritability at work
- Low productivity at work
- Low job satisfaction
- Self-medication

The Mayo clinic indicates that a common factor in burnout is “doubts about your competence and the value of your work.” Self-Determination Theory might have something to say about that.

Burnout is common in the “helping professions,” like nursing and…you guessed it…teaching. That’s why I thought it would be relevant to understand the condition and recognize the signs of burnout. Indeed, it came up in the interviews I did for this study.

Burnout can apply to things other than work, though. One could replace the word “work” in each symptom of the condition list above with words like “spouse” or “school.” Sometimes people quit for reasons that have nothing to do with their jobs and everything to do with their personal lives. I was on the lookout for factors like that too, and burnout in a different part of life
was one for which I watched. In a turn of events that is good for the men in my study, this kind of non-work burnout did not show up as an important factor in their dissatisfactions.

Some descriptions of conditions that elicit burnout (at work, home, in relationships, etc.) include:

- Lack of control over responsibilities, schedule.
- Unclear job expectations.
- Dysfunctional social environment
- Misalignment of skills with requirements
- Extreme activity and urgency fluctuations
- Lack of social support.

Some or all of these conditions seem likely to come up in almost any deep conversation about work, in my experience. For that reason, I felt that burnout literature needed to be reviewed before completing this study.

**Masculinity in America**

As stated earlier, based on some of the literature about working male teachers, it seems that socially constructed concepts of masculinity play a role in male teacher burnout and leaving (Sargent, 2001). I would like to briefly discuss the concept of hegemonic masculinity here in an attempt to contextualize the lives of my interviewees in the larger culture. I wanted to understand generalized issues surrounding masculinity as a concept in the U.S. before I began. People are affected differentially by societal expectations and their own comfort level with those expectations. Hegemonic masculinity pushes some of these expectations. The short story is that our culture exerts pressures on men and boys to be gendered in predetermined ways and people
who do not adhere to these gender expressions experience various kinds of prejudice, or at a minimum are judged disapprovingly. Qualities associated with this kind of masculinity include toughness, strength, lack of emotions except anger, aggressive heterosexual sexuality, dominance, disrespect for intellectuals and women, and athletic ability. Many of these qualities would make for a bad elementary school teacher of either gender, so it’s unlikely that men who choose that career would exhibit many of these qualities, though they can certainly exhibit a few of them. As a result of being caring men who value education, enjoy spending their days with young people, and express no signs of sexuality, these men will be scrutinized unfavorably. As I showed in Chapter One, this attitude has been echoed throughout the historical literature of the state of education in America.

**Masculinity in Schools**

There is another side of this coin that suggests that a lot of the educational techniques and preferences being used today are actually punishing young masculinity, and that these conditions have not always been in place. Thomas Newkirk is one author who has written about this in his work, *Misreading Masculinity: Boys, Literacy and Popular Culture* (Newkirk, 2002). In this book, Newkirk argues persuasively that current literacy practices place too much focus on quiet, internal literacy and not enough focus on types of literacy that boys tend to prefer, like collaborative, vocal, and functionally-directed literacy. He argues that there is a relevancy gap in our practices that put boys at a disadvantage in academic environments, especially in elementary school.

At the same time, the hegemonic masculinity described above exerts pressures on male students to not fall subject to the aspects of academia that would violate the qualities of a “real” boy. In this view, enjoying silent reading and being good at math are qualities that are considered
to be “nerdy,” an epithet that very few boys wish to be called during those formative years. The school system here is at odds with the culture. The school system wants compliant, quiet bodies sitting still and doing what they’re told, but the culture wants powerful, independent, muscular men who solve problems in their own way, usually alone, and often with force. To which party should a young boy listen? It’s really no contest. As Newkirk explains, what better alter-ego could there be for Superman, the most powerful, masculine man in literature, than that of a nerdy writer? No one would ever suspect!

Newkirk goes on to make a compelling case that silent reading for pleasure is not even inherently a good thing. This is surely shocking to many academics and school teachers. Isn’t reading the foundation of all knowledge? No, he argues. It is not. The ability to read is a useful skill, certainly. Few would deny that. What he argues, citing the likes of Cervantes, Rousseau, Shakespeare, Plato, Montaigne, and many modern scholars, is that, for centuries, reading was considered to be a substitute for action, when action wasn’t possible. Newkirk’s argument is a fun and thoughtful rumination on the idea that reading doesn’t produce anything. There is no observable output of reading. He even argues that silent reading in schools is partially responsible for the explosion in testing, because there is no way to know whether anyone has successfully read anything unless they are tested. He makes the case that the way reading is now positioned in schools more negatively impacts boys than girls because of the ways that culture and possibly biology pit boys against those forces in ways that boys have trouble overcoming. Silent reading has become popular not because it is a great educational process, but because it is a handy way to get students to sit down and shut up, especially boys. Consequently, many boys grow to see silent reading as a punishment. The obvious question left with the reader is whether there could be a better way.
Author Stephen Johnson makes a similar argument in humorous form in his book Everything Bad is Good for You (Johnson S., 2005), in which he positions silent reading as a scourge on humanity in an epic rant, giving it the same treatment that many parents and cultural critics have applied to things like television and videogames over the years. He rips into silent reading as an isolating, immobilizing, corrupting, and ultimately selfish activity fit only for antisocial miscreants. It’s all in good fun, as his point is to show that the same arguments can be made (and have been) about almost any medium. Postman (Postman, 1982), for example, wrote that “watching television not only requires no skills, but develops no skills.” About video games, Boris Johnson wrote in 2006 that “computer games rot the brain” (Johnson B., 2006). It’s like a rite of passage for a medium to be accused of being worthless, or worse. Reading is no different.

No, authors who write books to sell are probably not truly against reading. They simply want to make it clear that reading is one type of literacy among many, and that perhaps reading doesn’t deserve the vaunted place in education it now has. Stephen Johnson also suggests that these other types of literacy may deserve a higher place than where they presently reside. Both Newkirk’s and Johnson’s arguments are compelling to me.

I mention these works because it seems possible that male teachers could have some insights into using alternative forms of literacy in classrooms if they themselves have had similar experiences throughout their own educational lives. I thought my interviewees might be able to shed some light on whether any of Newkirk’s arguments manifested in their own classrooms and what they did about it if they saw them.
Conclusion

There are many potential frustrations stemming from sources institutional, societal, historical, and cultural conspiring to make elementary teaching a challenging career for men in America at this moment in history.

This study worked to shine a light on those perceived frustrations, taken as a body of possible explanations, by talking directly to the men who experienced them.
Chapter Three: Methodology

“I can’t tell you what it really is, I can only tell you what it feels like.”
(Love the way you lie, 2010)

Narrative Inquiry

For this study, I used a research method called Narrative Inquiry, also sometimes called Narrative Analysis. Narrative Inquiry is a method of investigation created to capture and study stories, conversations, interviews and life experiences in an effort to understand the way people create meaning in their lives by placing themselves in narrativized stories. My approach with this technique was primarily guided by Reissman (Reissman C. K., 1993) (Reissman C. K., 2008) while being supported by works from Connelly and Clandinin (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) and Webster and Mertova (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

The main thrust of narrative inquiry is to seek out, collect, and analyze stories told by people who lived them. It is well-suited for questions involving the ways in which experiences and internal reflections shape individuals (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Human beings “think, perceive, imagine, and make moral choices according to narrative structures” (Sarbin, 1986, p. 8), so the most natural method of reconstituting those experiences for researchers is to ask participants to tell their own stories. “Experience cannot be captured just through empirical methods, summarizing the experience and issues surrounding it using statistical figures…such an approach is insufficient and restricting” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 3).

The long intellectual history of the development of narrative inquiry spans multiple fields of study including psychology (Sarbin, 1986); (Bruner J. S., 2009), anthropology (Maanen, 1988), social sciences (Polkinghorne, 1988), and education (Dewey J. , 1938a) (Dewey J. , 1938b). In the last couple of decades, narrative inquiry has become more widely accepted as a useful method for communicating the thought-processes behind human behavior in context.
Mertova and Webster (2007, p. 4) explain that narrative inquiry “provides researchers with a rich framework through which they can investigate the ways humans experience the world depicted through their stories.” And ultimately, “Narrative allows researchers to present experience holistically in all its complexity and richness” (ibid).

**Why Use Narrative Inquiry?**

Life is lived narratively. We are all the protagonists of our own stories and our stories are shaped by our authorship and identities. As Bruner (Bruner, 1987, p. 31) tells it, “life is not ‘how it was’ but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold.” If we think that argument holds water, then it makes sense to study life stories using a storied research method. Clandinin and Connelly (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 19) argue the same point. “Experience happens narratively…therefore educational experience should be studied narratively.” Mertova and Webster (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 1) continue making the case by writing “Narrative is well-suited to addressing the complexities and subtleties of human experience in teaching and learning.” Elbaz (Elbaz, 1991, p. 3) brings it home when she writes “Story is the very stuff of teaching, the landscape within which we live as teachers and researchers, and within which the work of teachers can be seen as making sense.” All right. I’m willing to accept that now. But can narrative inquiry be rigorous and produce useful insights? Reissman (Reissman C. K., 1993) argues affirmatively; “Narrative analysis allows for systematic study of personal experience and meaning” (emphasis added). It is worth noting, as Elliot Mishler did (Mishler, 1996), that numerous theories of great significance were developed by researchers observing single cases or small groups, including enduring works by Freud, Piaget, Lewin, Erikson and Skinner. Given that I am attempting to understand how the small group of men involved in my study
experienced their worlds, and the ways in which their experiences shaped their choices. Narrative Inquiry is an appropriate method.

**Research Quality**

Before detailing what I actually did, I’d like to discuss some of the concerns about research quality that shaped my method.

One of the ongoing debates within narrative inquiry, and indeed within all qualitative research methods, revolves around the enduring prominence of the requirement of validity, reliability, and generalizability for any research to be considered “good” (Morrow & Smith, 2000). This demands definitions.

- Validity means a study accurately measures what it is designed to measure.
- Reliability means a study can be replicated and produce the same results.
- Generalizability means the findings of a study can be applied to people who are similar to the study participants in the wider world and results will be the same with those people as they were with those in the study.

Numerous narrative researchers have problems with these terms and the concepts they represent. They argue that these are not qualities narrative researchers (or many other kinds of qualitative researchers) should be attempting to achieve. They have come up with a host of other qualities that should be considered more important for this kind of research. Connelly and Clandinin (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) prefer the constructions of “adequacy” and “plausibility.” Hammersley (Hammersley, 1990) adds the term “credibility” to the mix. Blumenfeld-Jones (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995) looks for “fidelity” and “believability.” Golden-Biddle and Locke argue for “authenticity” and “criticality” (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 2007). I’m going to use the constructs of Van Maanen, one of the methodologists who strongly makes the
case that reliability and validity are overrated in this kind of work, and who instead argues that we should be more concerned with apparency and verisimilitude (Maanen, 1988).

• Apparency essentially means easy to see and understand. Noblit and Hare describe apparency as the ability of language to ‘show’ us experience rather than merely referring to it (Noblit & Hare, 1988). If a reader thinks “I feel her pain” then the work has achieved apparency.

• Verisimilitude means having the appearance of truth. Verisimilitude is often used in film and theater critique as a way of classifying a work as feeling “real” versus feeling stilted, artificial, or contrived. Verisimilitude in narrative research replaces empirical validity. It’s not the same thing, but it serves the same purpose. Essentially, it does not matter if the stories told are reported exactly as reality occurred. It is only important that they are believable. Amsterdam and Bruner put it this way: “Stories derive their power not from verifiability, but from verisimilitude: they will be true enough if they ring true” (Bruner & Amsterdam, 2000, p. 30). Webster and Mertova make the same argument, writing that “narrative research does not claim to represent the exact truth, but rather aims for verisimilitude – that results have the appearance of truth or reality” (Webster & Mertova, 2007). The point is that this kind of work cannot be triangulated and verified in traditionally-approved ways because we are not trying to find “the truth.” Instead, narrative research aims for its findings to be well-grounded and supportable.

I believe a strong case has been by numerous methodologists in support of the abandonment of what Patton calls “traditional” reliability and validity measures (Patton, 2002) as requirements for this study. What do we need instead to assure that our studies meet a standard of quality?
**Trustworthiness**

According to Lincoln & Guba, something we can instead shoot for is a quality called trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, The only generalization is: There is no generalization, 2000). Morrow and Smith refer to this same quality simply as “goodness” (Morrow & Smith, 2000).

Lincoln and Guba created a list of evaluative criteria that they argue help to assure trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, Naturalistic Inquiry, 1985). These criteria are:

- Credibility - confidence in the 'truth' of the findings
- Transferability - the findings have applicability in other contexts
- Confirmability - the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest.
- Dependability - the findings are consistent and could be repeated

As one might imagine, I wanted this study to be trustworthy. I have done my best to address and meet these criteria in the ways described below.

**Credibility**

Credibility: confidence in the 'truth' of research findings

To achieve credibility, I made efforts to corroborate (or triangulate) my interview findings by seeking other data sources that spoke to the issues my participants raised. These proved hard to find. My participants had not kept much evidence of their teaching careers. My own field notes and transcripts contributed to credibility in their own ways, and allowed for member checking which is a well-regarded method of at least assuring data quality. Member checking is a process of asking participants to review transcripts and/or interpretations to get confirmation that a researcher has accurately captured what was said. I attempted to do this with the transcripts of seven of my eight participants, but only checked interpretations with two. Four
of my eight participants were willing to read and check their transcripts. The other four members didn’t think it was necessary. They argued some variation on the point that if I recorded the interviews and wrote what was recorded, that they were confident that they wouldn’t need to change anything. I didn’t push them very hard because I felt like those arguments were sensible. I produced high-quality recordings on multiple devices with little extraneous noise, and had no trouble transcribing their words, so I had to agree with them. The four participants who did check their transcripts indicated that they appeared to be accurate and reported no qualms with them. I approached two of my participants to listen in person to my interpretations of the whole group’s data. These interpretations were received with mostly nodding heads and expressions of surprise and approval. I received no recommendations for changes, though listening to my interpretations did generate new discussions, as these men had not personally experienced or told stories containing every theme. They did not find any of the stories or interpretations to be controversial (to them). The general response was something akin to “Sounds about right.”

Despite looking at lesson plans, school policy papers and other written documents, I found nothing in those that enhanced the themes that arose from the interviews. In fact, as one of my participants explained, “the paperwork doesn’t tell the story.” He went on to explain how not only doesn’t it tell the story but that it is misleading. “You cannot understand what happens in the classroom by looking at lesson plans and institutional mandates.” Another likened his own efforts to meet his school’s paperwork requirements to the way truck drivers used to keep two sets of books for their mileage and sleep logs. “You have the book for the government, and you have the book for yourself,” he said. “Except in our case the book for yourself is mostly in your head.” I asked if I could see these books and not a one of them still had anything they could
locate. It was as if they had uniformly sought to excise that part of their lives from existence. As we shall see, aside from one man, they had no intention of ever using them again.

This lack of paperwork was not overly concerning to me though, because narrative analysis is primarily interested in stories as told by the people who lived them. Even if transcribed and reduced spoken narratives were the only data sources used in this study, they would still allow readers to use the verisimilitude test of trustworthiness: Do people who are similar to the storytellers believe what they are reading?

**Transferability**

Transferability: research findings have applicability in other contexts

Guba and Lincoln argue that the concept of generalizability as traditionally understood should be replaced by the concept of transferability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), that is the idea that the findings from a qualitative study can be applied elsewhere if a reader believes they can. It is quite similar to generalizability except that transferability is considered to be the responsibility of the transferer, not the researcher. If the reader of a work of classroom research says to him or herself while reading the paper, “I bet that would work with my students,” then transferability has been achieved. One of the keys of transferability is providing a rich account of the context in which the study occurred and the assumptions that underlie it. It’s easier for a reader to imagine something working in a different context if they feel like they can fully understand what happened in the study and can see similarities between their own situation and that of the study participants. Webster and Mertova are also in the camp of reducing the prominence of generalizability, claiming that “narrative research does not strive to produce conclusions of certainty” (Webster & Mertova, 2007). There should be no expectation of a neatly wrapped package of “truth” in the results section of a narrative inquiry study. We are, after all, talking
about human beings in complex social environments. Polkinghorne drives the point home when he writes “conclusions of narrative research generally stay open-ended” (Polkinghorne, 1988). Indeed, very little about unconstrained human behavior is certain at all beyond strict biological processes. It seems ridiculous to claim otherwise.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability: findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest.

I include transcribed excerpts in my results to show that my interpretations are clearly grounded in data. Potter and Wetherell demand as much when they write “text extracts are a necessary basis for the researcher’s argumentation in the research report, and they also provide the linguistic evidence for the researcher’s interpretations” (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Additionally, I have described my own biases and preconceptions as I understand them (below) and made a vow to bracket them to the best of my ability for the duration of this study.

**Dependability**

Dependability: research findings are consistent and could be repeated.

The goal of much of this chapter is to describe in sufficient detail my processes of data source selection, data collection techniques, data handling and analysis processes, and reporting methods so that if another researcher were to undertake this study using these same processes, techniques, and methods, that s/he would arrive at substantially similar findings. If I have successfully done this, I will have achieved dependability. I believe I have met this goal.

**Untenable Recommendations**

Lincoln and Guba also recommend prolonged engagement and persistent observations. Due to the temporally reflective nature of this narrative inquiry, it was impossible to follow those
recommendations. There was no way to know which teachers were going to quit until they have done it and I did not have the resources to blanket the field and observe all male teachers in the hopes of seeing the unfolding of events that led to some of them quitting. In fact, that would have been doubly wasteful because this study isn’t about the events. It is concerned with the participants’ perceptions of the events. Schwartz and Sharpe suggest that perceptions are all there are. “We might wish to see things ‘as they really are,’ but there is no way that things ‘really are,’ at least not in the complex and chaotic social world we inhabit” (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2011, p. 65). For my participants, their stories are the truth. That did, however, mean that I needed to collect copious narrative accounts of participants’ experiences to successfully grasp the inputs to their decision-making processes. Thus, in my efforts to collect sufficient raw data with which to arrive at what Lincoln and Guba call a “thick description” (a term popularized by (Geertz, 1973)), I followed Seidman’s extensive interview protocols (Seidman I., 2006) for my data collection technique.

By authoritatively addressing Lincoln and Guba’s evaluative criteria to the best of my ability, I believe I have achieved a research product that can be called trustworthy and good

**Research Design**

Now it’s time to explain how I conducted this present study. I will summarize my research design here, then explicate each step below.

1.) Participants were defined

2.) Participants were selected

3.) Participants were interviewed

4.) Interviews were transcribed into text

5.) Analytic methods were applied methodically to the interview data
6.) Results were presented

Participants Were Defined

Before I explain how I acquired my participants, I need to tell you what kind of people this study required.

I intended for my participants to be eight to ten male former elementary school teachers who voluntarily quit the teaching profession. I prioritized men who taught for several years or more in the hopes that this type of participant experienced the profession sufficiently to relate a wide range of stories and thorough descriptions of possible decision-influencing factors. I considered shorter-tenured former teachers because I supposed that they might describe additional influencing factors that differ from teachers who stayed longer.

In that description are embedded requirements. To clarify, my participants:

• Are and always have been men.
• Were teachers of elementary school (K-5 or 6) for at least one full year
• Voluntarily quit teaching and took up another profession
• Did not move into school administration or teaching older students
• Were willing to talk to me about their experiences. Desired but not required qualities included:
  • graduated from a four-year college or university where they majored in elementary education
  • stayed longer than five years (50% of all teachers leave within the first five years and the number drops dramatically after that. It takes 25 more years to lose the other 50% and many of those retire early or die rather than choosing to quit prematurely. I
hypothesized that the longer they taught before quitting, the more likely it was that
the reasons they would cite for quitting would not include that teaching simply
wasn’t for them.)

I specifically looked for men who chose to leave the profession rather than move into
administration or into high school teaching positions because I hypothesized that they would
have the most dramatic and extensive tales to tell. The literature indicates that among the few
male elementary school teachers we have, an inordinate number of them are asked to become
administrators. This should be concerning to women, but it is also often concerning to the men
themselves, many of whom express a desire to stay in the teaching field because their desire to
teach was what caused them to enter the profession in the first place. By sticking around for
more than five years, they will have verified that this career choice wasn’t a flash in the pan.
They were dedicated. But to then decide to change their profession after spending four or more
years in college and five or more years teaching, there must have been some dramatic stories to
recount.

I hoped to collect those stories.

**Participants Were Selected**

Using my extensive social network in the educational space, I was able to acquire enough
participants who fit the descriptions I set forth as important for this study. Let me describe how I
did that. I started out looking for seven to ten men who met all of my requirements and who were
willing to talk at length with me. I began the search with convenience sampling for the
acquisition of the initial pool of candidates. Convenience sampling is defined as selecting
“participants who are readily available and who meet the study criteria” (Morse, 2004). I have
several first-degree friends who are or have been teachers and they knew many others. People in
my network belong to affinity groups that contain many teachers, and all of these people helped spread the word that I was looking for former elementary school teachers who chose to leave the profession. I was able to acquire eight participants using this direct approach, though only one of the final pool of men was someone I had met before the study began. I attempted to develop a larger pool of acceptable candidates than I needed and I did forego interviews with two former teachers because one had been out of teaching for quite a while and the other had quit within the first year. I kept them in reserve in case I felt the data pool didn’t reach saturation, but I concluded that I had acquired sufficient data to draw some interesting conclusions without using them. I will describe the participants in detail in Chapter Four. To arrive at the specific list of participants whom I ended up interviewing, I engaged in “sampling-for-meaning” (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995). The terms “purposive sampling” (Oliver, 2006) and “appropriate sampling” (Morse, 2004) have been floated as alternative names for what I perceive to be the same process, described below.

Sampling-for-meaning is a technique of acquiring participants that is based on the ideal that a sample for a qualitative research study such as this should provide a generous cross-section of the population under investigation and that the best way to accomplish that is to purposely select participants who represent to the greatest degree possible the maximum extent of relevant participant characteristics. Luborsky and Rubinstein call this extent “the scope of the universe to be sampled” (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995). It’s not always obvious what participant characteristics are relevant initially, so an expansive, flexible view is desirable. As a baseline, I looked for diversity in: region of school where employed (Northeast, South), residential classification (urban, suburban, rural), ethnic origin, height, type of college attended, location of high school attended, childhood SES, etc. There is a recommendation (by some) in qualitative
inquiry that the inclusion of outliers specifically (e.g. (Kaufman, 1989)), or “negative cases” (Morse, 2004), should be encouraged rather than discarding them as has traditionally been the case, in an effort to illuminate as much of the spectrum of experience under investigation as possible. Due to the bounded nature of my requirements, it seemed unlikely that any characteristic would have placed a potential participant in the category of outlier, and indeed it didn’t, so I didn’t incorporate that recommendation, though I am not dismissive of it.

Another key to successful sampling-for-meaning is that “subjectively important temporal factors have to be understood to identify valid units for analyses...” (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995). This indicates that the problem or phenomenon under investigation must be understood to be contextually and temporally situated and that the conditions imposed by those contexts and historical timeframes must be recognized and accounted for in the sample. This is essentially the same argument I made when explicating my unified theoretical framework, minus the sample. Luborsky and Rubinstein (like me) admit that it is not easy to do and that it is inherently researcher-influenced, but they suggest that the ideal can be approached by immersing oneself in the literature and culture of the community under investigation prior to selecting and screening participants, and then selecting the participants for the study based on a diversity of characteristics that appear to be necessary to build a rich and meaningful data set. I did these things.

**Interviews Were Conducted**

The process of engaging in research begins with an idea and a design process, but the real action kicks in with the data collection.
Data Collection: Interviewing Strategies

I collected the bulk of my data by interviewing my participants twice and in some cases one time. Seidman suggests three interviews is the ideal number (Seidman I., 2013), but he isn’t rigid in this recommendation. For me, the decision of whether to undertake a second or third interview was dependent on how the first and second interview went and to what degree it seemed as if the source (the participant) had exhausted his narrative pool surrounding the events and time periods under investigation. Reissman agrees that multiple interviews are ideal. “…it is preferable to have repeated conversations rather than the typical one-shot interview, especially when studying biographical experience.” (Reissman C. K., 2008, p. 26). Seidman (2006) indicates that placing the lives of the interviewees in context is very important (and by now you shouldn’t be surprised to hear that I agree) and he suggests reserving the first interview explicitly for this activity. In that first meeting, he recommends acquiring a life history with respect to the topic up to the present time. This resulted to an equivalent of what I described earlier as the stories necessary to create an historically and culturally situated identity. The second interview is used to collect stories of the focal experience and the third is used to “reflect on the meaning of their experience” (Seidman I., 2006, p. 33). The interviews need to have enough time between them to allow for reflection, and Seidman recommends a span of several days to a week between each meeting. I followed these recommendations, having between 7 and 14 days between interviews (with each man) in all cases. The difference between his recommendation and my reality was that I combined the three topics into two interviews in six of the men’s cases, and combined them into one interview in two men’s cases. These last two men lived in distant cities to which I drove and we decided to see if we could cover all of our intended ground in one straight shot. I felt that we succeeded. By this point, I was approaching saturation (Strauss, 1987) as well, so I was able to move more quickly through some of the topics. I still used the same
order of topics, and we talked for substantially longer in each interview than he recommends in almost all cases. The interviews were nominally expected to last 60-90 minutes but I was prepared to continue listening based upon the participant’s level of enthusiasm and verbosity. In the end, my interviews all ranged between 55 and 122 minutes. During my interviews with these eight teachers, each of them revealed long-hidden thoughts, stories, and details about their lives at work and in life. They were, for the most part, quite forthcoming with their opinions and stories, and all were thoughtful and articulate in attempting to answer my interview questions. I sought to deeply understand these participants’ states of mind and ways of thinking about teaching and other work experiences, as well as their ideas and opinions of school system function and societal design.

Regarding interviews designed to produce data for narrative analysis, it is important to structure questions in such a way so as to create space for the participants to generate stories rather than merely answer questions. As Reissman says “Certain kinds of open-ended questions are more likely than others to encourage narrativization.” Such questions begin with phrases like the following:

- “Can you think of a time…”
- “Can you tell me about a situation in which…”
- “When was the first time you realized…”

We should keep in mind, though, that sometimes questions that appear to have a one-word answer can get people talking. This will certainly vary with the topic area and the participants’ experiences and gregariousness. For example, Essed asked black women “Have you ever experienced discrimination when you applied for a job?” (Essed, 1988) and Labov (Labov, 1982) asked inner-city youth “Were you ever in a situation where you thought you were in
serious danger of getting killed?” Both of these questions appear to require a one-word answer but stories were delivered multiple times in response to both questions. The goal is to open the door so that stories can walk through. We want to do our best to facilitate and encourage storytelling without unduly influencing the outcomes. In an effort to do this, I used an interview guide (Merton, Fisk, & Kendall, 1956). This guide provided several broad, open-ended questions and a list of potential probing questions like “Tell me more about that.” Before going into the interview questions themselves, I would like to briefly mention interview styles.

There are different approaches to interviewer interaction with participants. Many qualitative researchers discuss the collaborative and dialogic nature of interviewing and the shared responsibility for meaning-making that exists within the dyadic conversational interview. Connelly and Clandinin, (1990), fully commit to this school of thought saying of the transcribed interview, “the thing finally written...is a collaborative document; a mutually constructed story created out of the lives of both researcher and participant.”

But there are others who espouse a more minimalist approach. Sociologist Bell explains the approach she used this way. “Listen with a minimum of interruptions” and when asking for clarification to repeat the participants’ words whenever possible. In short, she suggests that the researcher fade back and allow the storyteller to come to the fore. (Bell, 1988) Seidman sums up the same idea with the concise admonition: “Listen more. Talk less” (Seidman I., 2006, p. 78)

I opted for this second approach. While I acknowledge that my mere presence influenced the interview, and that it wouldn’t be happening were I not there, I wanted to have minimal impact on the content of the stories the participants told. I wanted to make them feel comfortable, get them talking, and let their stories freely emerge. As an introvert with a history of deep listening and a penchant and enthusiasm for learning from others, I found it easy to do this
effectively. There was, of course, some interaction and co-construction of meaning. That can’t be denied. I simply tried to keep it to a minimum.

I had no worries going in about “giving up control of the interview” (Reissman C. K., 2008, p. 24) or moving away from my hoped-for topics of stories. Participants returned to the studies’ foci soon enough, and were happy to continue talking to me. Those so-called “digressions” sometimes led to unforeseen narratives that revealed new and important insights. All of these men seemed happy to discuss meaningful events from their own lives for as long as I was willing to listen.

**Why Interviews?**

In order to find out what is happening inside people’s heads now, we have to ask them now (Talja, 1999). We have to get them talking, explaining, describing, complaining, and storytelling, now. The act of verbalizing and describing events brings to life and connects thoughts that may never have been connected before. As Vygotsky (1987) puts it, the very process of putting experience into language is a meaning-making process. We need our subjects to talk because we learn things through their linguistic constructions that cannot be seen by observations alone. “Language is…an indispensable part of the subject’s self-understanding, since words are present in every act of interpretation” (Volosinov, 1986). Interviews force storytellers to bring forth their thoughts and put them into words that they have at their disposal. Their choice of which words is part of the fun here. As I have argued earlier, individuals are not able to self-modify their resources of interpretation freely, since they are limited by the sum-total of their specific cultural and historical existence. How they put their stories together in words that have meanings to them in the here and now reveals how they see themselves, how they see the world, and how they understand the function of systems into which they were embedded.
“Surely, talk expresses what is in an individual’s mind” (Talja, 1999). The stories of my participants revealed much. That is why I did interviews to collect my data.

As expected, the stories my participants told were extensive. As I said earlier, they were forthcoming with stories and happy to spend as much time as I needed. All told, I collected more than 20 hours of interview data.

**Interview Guide**

Interviewing in this kind of study should not be rigid and questions don’t need to be predetermined. It is desirable to have the flexibility to follow the leads where they take you. A guide isn’t necessary, but it can help the researcher to spur conversation if the participant isn’t forthcoming. Seidman (2006, p. 88) recommends questions that urge the storyteller to “reconstruct” their stories rather than “remembering” them. This is done by asking for concrete examples and descriptions of events rather than hazy memories of feelings and general recollections of time periods. He adds (p. 92) that interview guides can be useful but must be used with caution. They should only be called upon to get stories going rather than being used to check off answers to a bunch of questions. Researchers must also be aware that what may be of interest to them may be of little interest to the person being interviewed. Given these understandings, I developed the following questions and prompts to elicit the kinds of stories I believed would help to answer my research questions.

- Describe your journey to becoming a teacher.
- When did you realize you wanted to become a teacher?
- What were your expectations about what teaching would be like?
- Tell me about one of your favorite moments teaching.
- What specific challenges surprised you?
• Tell me about some of your least-favorite moments.
• Describe your relationship with your principle and other administrators.
• What qualities did you observe in other teachers during your teaching career that you would say made a successful teacher?
• Tell me of a time when you thought something unfair happened.
• Can you describe conditions that would have kept you there?

**Data Saturation**

Researchers must remain flexible in determining the right number of participants to interview. Data saturation can determine whether a planned-for number needed to be higher or could have been lower. Indeed, “the exact number and appropriate techniques for sampling cannot be stated at the design stage but must emerge during the process of conducting the research” (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995).

The concept of data saturation is one often used to bound qualitative inquiries. Saturation is achieved when no new data is garnered by the designed collection technique. It becomes evident that saturation is approaching when data begins to be repeated, stories sound very familiar, and new narratives become more and more rare. While almost everyone’s story is unique and interesting, the underlying themes and patterns of their stories may all be remarkably similar. In fact, this underlying similarity is one of the reasons we can claim transferability of results from studies such as this. In this study, I perceived saturation to have begun happening with about the 5th participant and I decided by the 7th that I could cease seeking new participants. I interviewed my previously scheduled 8th participant and felt that he confirmed my decision. It should be noted that this was after the second interview with the 5th participant, so it was only
after 12-14 hours of interviews that I noticed what I perceived to be diminishing returns on each successive interview.

**Analytical Methods Were Applied**

Despite the august team of researchers and philosophers working toward an understanding of how narrative inquiry can and should be done, there is still “no one method of narrative inquiry” (Webster & Mertova, 2007), “no standard set of procedures” (Reissman, 1993, p. 54), so I relied on Reissman and Pinar (Pinar, 1975) to guide the way. Reissman’s narrative analytical toolkit has been under development and used by her and many others for decades. It is deeply considered and provides excellent yet flexible guidance. Let me explain what this method entails.

**Phase One - Telling**

Reissman begins by expressing the need for the acquisition of stories. She calls this the “telling” phase. In my case, the storytelling was facilitated by the interviewing process described above, and was digitally recorded with the agreement of all involved. For six of the men, I audio-recorded the interviews in person using redundant digital recording devices. With one of those men, I also video recorded the interview. For the two others, I recorded audio-visual screen-captures on a computer while using videophone technology and while the audio on those was good, the video was low quality. As expected, the iterative analytical process commenced during this data collection (interview) phase.

**Phase Two - Transcription**

After stories were acquired, they were transcribed. “[Recording] and transcribing are absolutely essential to narrative analysis” (Reissman C. K., 1993). I have strong opinions about transcription; how it changes meaning, loses meaning, and violently oppresses meaning with its
formal and limited presentation. I frankly find it offensive that we think that transcription is acceptible at all. It is utterly incapable of delivering the richness of information that comes from speaking with a living human being. For the same reasons that narrative radio shows have been replaced by television and movies, so too should the exclusive use of textual representations of audio and video “data” for studies be sent to the academic trash bin of history. A phrase used synonymously with transcription is “to render speech into words.” I find the word “render” to be a curiously appropriate word choice. It’s the same process that turns horses into glue. Melt them down and turn them into something utterly different from what they were before. And the process smells bad. As a noun, the word “render” means someone who violently tears things apart. Sounds about right. But sadly, we live in a world ruled by and drowning in text, and this study needed to follow the academic conventions required for acceptability. So I transcribed the interviews.

I expected to learn some things as I did this. Reissman recommends personally re-transcribing the parts of the interview that take narrative form. She indicates that “the task of identifying narrative segments and their representation cannot be delegated.” I agreed and did this. To that end, I listened repeatedly to the interviews through headphones while speaking them with my own voice into a voice-recognizing dictation software tool that I had trained to understand me. This process gave me the unique experience of almost becoming the participant. I was reliving, and re-voicing other people’s stories as if they were my own. Coming from a film and theatre background, I recognized this as a way some actors put themselves into other people’s headspaces. Fortunately, these men did not have a lot of dark psychological quicksand into which I could have lost myself. I transcribed everything this way myself, but I was strategic in the process. I listened to the complete interviews, processed all passages mentally, and
transcribed a preponderance of selected passages verbatim. I sometimes let parts of the interviews go without transcribing because I remembered or determined through repeated listening that they did not contain useful elements. By selecting what to transcribe and what parts to discard, I was already engaging in the beginning of analysis. This, along with a post-transcription selection process, resulted in narrative “meaning units,” which is another way of describing (in the case of this study) discrete and complete stories that I chose to then analyze in more depth. Listening repeatedly to the audio recording, focusing on “the way the story is told” helped to provide “clues about meaning” (Reissman 1993). This reinforces my argument that textual representation of data isn’t sufficient, and supported my desire to rely primarily on audio as my data modality of choice. I did not receive guidance concerning how to denote the prosodic (non-word) clues that were sometimes contained in the participants’ delivery, but I will describe the process I used as it arises in the write-up.

**Phase Three - Analysis**

As noted above, analysis began in phase two as a side-effect of the transcription process, and in phase three became the primary objective. Interview transcripts of selected passages were analyzed to reveal deeper, transferable ideas, themes, and concepts. How does one analyze a narrative? That is an interesting question because the process is under serious debate. I am going to tell you what I decided to do and support that with the recommendations of some experienced and respected scholars who work in this area.

One way of approaching the development of themes with this kind of data is to attempt to absorb the full scope of the data, using a process explicated by Moustakas, that suggests the content should be spread out on a “horizon” (Moustakas, 1994). The idea is to lay it all out before you, and really see it, without prejudice or regard for what is important. I re-listened to the
recorded interviews, examined the remaining verbatim sections of the interviews, and studied the narratives that were relevant to my research questions. I then employed Reissman’s approach of narrative reduction during which I searched for motivational and intentional clues as well as reactions of the teller to the events discussed in the narratives. Narrative reduction involves selecting narrative units and removing digressions, non-meaningful utterances, and linguistic obstacles that don’t benefit the story. It’s the boiling down of a narrative to its rich, tasty essence. That’s why she uses the term reduction. It’s like a written equivalent of thickening and intensifying the flavor of a soup. I set about to reduce my selected narratives in this way. I occasionally added articles and conjunctions to produce grammatically correct sentences when reducing narratives, but only when necessary. Another way I describe this process is “trimming the fat” off of the stories. We qualitative researchers seem to like our cooking metaphors.

Once the reduction process appeared to be complete, I employed Pinar’s (1975) technique of comparing multiple reduced narratives (from different participants) with each other in the search for commonly-occurring events and possibly commonly-occurring reactions of the participants to such events. Pinar suggests that this process may “reveal basic structures or processes that cross biographical lines” (1975, pp 384-395). Next, I began generating codes and placing passages into categories. I rearranged and renamed these codes and categories several times during this process. I placed meaningful units of discourse -- mostly complete stories on the first pass but gradually working down to relevant paragraphs and even a few sentences – into my developing coded categories. Generally, I tried to keep stories whole, but some relevant verbalizations didn’t reach the standard of narrative.

Other aspects of storytelling that can sometimes be of interest are verbal techniques that storytellers use, usually unknowingly in interviews, that may reveal cognitive structures and self-
conceptions when they show up. These kinds of verbal tics, crutches, and manipulations happen quite often in life but usually go unnoticed. This kind of linguistic shifting includes the switching of grammatical person (e.g. first person to third person), and switching of tenses on the fly from past to present or, more rarely, to future tense. It may include shifting of pronouns to alter who the protagonist is momentarily (me to you). These switches can sometimes tell us things about the importance of different parts of the story, or of the power that certain memories still hold on the storyteller. I looked for these clues in the stories my participants told.

**Analysis Continues - Development of Themes**

As I processed the interview data, I employed my own variation of a process called thematizing (Moustakas, 1994) to help investigate patterns and look for trans-personal experiences (Pinar, 1975). Thematizing of the reduced narratives involved attempting to name the overarching processes or underlying feeling of the story. I asked myself what was really going on in each story. Doing this helped me to see recurrent thematically-similar frustrations, thought-processes, conditions and feelings emerge that could represent the experiences of the group as a whole, or in some cases a substantial portion of the group. As I did this, I coded each meaningful unit as a form of annotation. The resultant written, annotated narrative provided a structured comparison of the accounts of different people who experienced similar things, or had similar feelings about things, and allowed for identification of recurring themes. I repeatedly looked for such themes that arose across the data set. I refined and defined these themes and eventually named them. These themes became the nodal network upon which all of my findings hang.

Finally, I validated the results by checking with two of the participants to see if they felt that my conclusions were merited (Rossman & Rallis, 2003) and verisimilitudinous (Webster &
Mertova, 2007), a process I have referred to previously as member-checking. I only did this process with two of the men because it is onerous and time-consuming and I didn’t feel like I had sufficient relationship capital with the others to monopolize that kind of time. Those with whom I did this told me that even though some of the themes and stories had not happened to them, that all of the stories were recognized and acknowledged as sounding “true,” in the sense I wrote of earlier; what Bruner would call “ringing true” or what Webster and Mertova would call being “verisimilitudinous.” Fortunately, they indicated that these themes all sounded, in their words, “quite familiar” and “realistic.” A couple of times, they expressed surprise, saying things like “I haven’t thought of it like that.” Even in those cases, they did not deny that the interpretations sounded true.

**Phase Four – Findings are Reported**

After completing my data collection and analysis, I wrote up the results in a way that explains and supports what I found. I report these results as a series of ideas that I deem to be important “findings.” Each idea is summarized, then expounded upon with supporting excerpts from participant interviews and detailed analysis. Sometimes, the way results are reported can change the way the results are received. Also, the act of reporting may change the results because the process of preparing the reports for presentation may divulge new insights, expose new ways of presentation, or reveal errors that were previously missed or missing themes that need to be added. Therefore, I argue that the reporting phase is the final stage of the analytical process.

**On Researcher Influence**

Once again, it must be noted that this entire analytical process is inherently influenced by the investigator (in this case me, the author). As Starks and Trinidad write, “The researcher is the instrument for analysis across all phases of a qualitative research project” (Starks & Trinidad,
Analysis can start as early as during the interviews if they are dialogic and flexible, which mine were (although the dialogic aspect was intentionally limited). Then the parts of the interview that were chosen for further analysis were “linked to the…theoretical/epistemological positions the researcher values, and…often…personal biography” (Reissman C. K., 1993). For this reason, and so that the choices I made with the data are situated in a well-understood context, I have included a short biographical sketch of myself below to highlight some of my possible biases and predispositions. I also included the sizable description of my theoretical framework above to elucidate a lot of my thoughts about interacting with other people, and how I think those interactions can be interpreted. It is my sincere hope that my processes are transparent and my biases and predispositions are explicit, though there is no way to effectively report them all.

**Researcher Identity and Bias**

I have a lot of opinions. I won’t deny it. They tend toward an open, inclusive, curious and connected outlook. I value peace, health, justice, equality, and kindness, among other things. That being said, it will be my goal to bracket my worldviews during the interview and analysis stages of this research. Bracketing is a process designed to “mitigate the potential deleterious effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to the research and thereby to increase the rigor of the project” (Tufford & Newman, 2012). I consider myself to be surprisingly good at this due to my natural naïveté and curiosity. I have lived much of my life in the shadow of the biblical admonition attributed to Jesus: “Judge not lest ye be judged” (Matthew 7:1). I have taken this to heart since I was a young boy and never saw much reason to start judging as I grew older. This failure to apply preconceptions to anyone or anything has gotten me in trouble on a couple of occasions (with both people and animals and at least one inanimate object) but it has generally
served me well. I have found it to be especially useful when listening to people (under any circumstances) and looking at data. I think this is the same mindset as that which Gadamer calls hermeneutic consciousness (Gadamer, 2008). When in such a state, an individual is “radically undogmatic,” and “prepared to have and learn from new experiences” (Weinsheimer, 1985). Such a mindset allows me to elicit stories without judgment and recognize patterns without bias. Or so I like to think.

No matter how innocent a person might be (and I’m not saying I’m innocent), the simple fact of having grown up in a culture and having learned a particular language forces upon one a worldview. Words denote and connote things, and the things that are denoted and connoted by words have values attached. Ideas that exist in one language may not exist in another. Different things are considered right and wrong in different cultures, and in different times. I agree with Habermas and Foucault who have each written variations on the idea that no one who functions as an adult human can exist without some kind of worldview. Accepting that, when doing research it is my goal to reduce the influence of my own worldview to whatever maximum degree is possible, taking into account my proclivities and the conditions of the research. Since it is inherently impossible for my worldview not to intervene to some degree upon my research, I offer this section on my identity, which is designed to explicate my own biases as I understand them.

First, I am a man. This alone carries with it a host of inclinations and baggage. I am unapologetically masculine and I accept the baggage of masculinity without regret. I grew up in a rural yet relatively well-educated section of Pennsylvania, in the United States, with two older brothers and two parents, a man and a woman who were married, and both of whom worked as public school teachers. I spent a great deal of time alone as a child, and had what one might
describe as an independent childhood for a substantial fraction of my youth. My friends and I played outside all day with no adult supervision and came home for meals and bedtime. Most of my friends were other boys, though there were a few girls who were part of the core group for many years of my life. We were extremely active. We rode our bicycles all over the town and county, we went sled-riding in the winter from the moment school ended until bedtime, often skipping dinner, we made our own high ropes courses (with no safety harnesses to be found, of course), built (and welded) our own crazy bikes, climbed trees, made bombs, played sports like street football and games like flashlight tag, and generally ran around the neighborhood looking for fun things to do. We were not destructive, and I in particular was disinclined to cause trouble or damage anyone else’s property. Even the aforementioned bombs were more science experiments than tools of destruction and were detonated in the woods or in open fields.

I mention these experiences because it is possible that they color my interpretations of what is happening in America at this time, and how male teachers and male students are dealing with the current conditions. It is possible that my beliefs about the psychological and physiological needs of boys and men are greatly impacted by my own perceived needs as a boy and a man. These underlying beliefs may have played a large part in my choosing this topic for investigation. I tend to think that many of the things that are happening in American culture at the time of this investigation are detrimental to the well-being of humans, and young male humans in particular. I am inclined to think that a shortage of male teachers throughout childhood seems likely to be less than ideal for young male students (and probably female students too), though I recognize that it is difficult to support this statement. At the very least, I think teachers should reflect the diversity of the general population, and sometimes I would prefer the teaching force to have a higher diversity than the general population to allow students
to witness a wide array of teacher-types to be seen, learned-from, and respected. As mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, this is not the case. Males are vastly underrepresented in elementary school as compared to the general population and that alone is enough of a reason for me to be concerned.

I think women are awesome. I love women. I am married to a woman and I have helped raise my daughter into an amazing young woman. I think some women make great teachers just as some men make great teachers. I think some women have an excellent grasp of the workings of the young male brain and can appropriately deal with it. I do not think that men are better teachers than women.

This does not stop me from thinking that men and women are different. I recognize that this puts me in a certain group and I am willing to be put there. I do not intend to essentialize gender and I don’t wish to highlight differences between the genders, but I feel confident in saying that at this time in history, in the United States of America, and most other countries with which I am familiar, men and women are, as groups, different from each other. This is part of my worldview. Independent of my own opinions on this matter, I also think that most children think that men and women are different from each other too. This is another instance in which the reality of gender differences does not matter, because even if there are no differences, children see men and women as different and respond differently to them.

Additionally, through virtually no effort on my part, I am basically a living embodiment of Audre Lorde’s “mythical norm” (Lorde, 1984), a white, heterosexual, middle-class, Protestant man (she also said “thin”, which I sadly cannot claim to be at the time of this writing but I’ll forgive her for that one because she wrote in a time of less ubiquitous obesity). I also happen to be tall, massive, and generally healthy. These characteristics provide a (very) long list of
privileges and benefits, many of which I am aware of and appreciate, while recognizing that many other people do not share such benefits.

**Conclusion**

Having established the research question, explained the rationale, situated the study within the academic discourse, and described the theoretical framework and method I used to undertake it, I shall next report what came of it.
Chapter Four: Results

This chapter explains how I have chosen to present the write-up, introduces my participants, and identifies themes arising from the data. In chapter five, I will present analysis of the themes. Let me begin by explaining my thinking about what you are about to read.

I took a strong cue from Belarussian investigative journalist and anthropologist Svetlana Alexievich, who wrote powerfully about post-soviet decay (Alexievich & Gessen, 2006). When I read her work *Voices from Chernobyl*, I recognized a literary technique that struck me as ideal for delivering the kind of narrative I hoped to provide in this dissertation. She talked to hundreds of survivors of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and wove a text from their interviews that brings the story of their experiences surrounding that event to life in a stunningly powerful and realistic way. She used the words of the people who lived through the events to tell their stories, creating composite characters whose experiences are at once universal and intimately private. I’m not doing the same thing, and my write-up will in no way be comparable with her work in depth or quality, as I have but eight men in my pool of interviewees, and my writing talents are no match for hers, but I think the technique does a compelling job of bringing the experiences and feelings of my participants to life. It’s fair to say that I was inspired by her work, but due to the requirements of proper research presentation, I did not do what she does. The one technique of hers that I used was that I sometimes merged stories into a composite that more effectively and concisely reveals the experiences my participants were trying to impart. My goal was to take my interview data, combine and reduce it, and create stories (for the most part) in the first person as told by my pool of teachers, using their own words. My hope in doing this was that the reader would develop an attachment to the narrators and feel their emotions as they tell their stories which I can then, in Chapter five discuss using my previously-described analytical toolset.
In short, chapter four contains the narratives and explication of themes and chapter five contains the analysis.

**Biographical Sketches**

Before I present the narratives and themes, I’d like to present my pool of teachers, already beginning the process of anonymizing them. During our interviews, it became clear that these men had very different preferences concerning anonymity. A couple of them had no concerns about being identified, and one of them even said I could use his real name if I wanted to. Others said if I wanted the truth, they needed to remain anonymous. One changed his mind partway through, deciding after he said some things that he would prefer not to be identified anymore. After discussing preliminary results with a few of the men, we collectively decided that I should keep all data as anonymized as practically possible. The technique I am now using will do a better job of that than my original plan of a more traditional narrative analysis. In this new write-up, all names have been eliminated, some biographical details have been altered, and no text will bear attribution, though if it is presented as a quotation, it was spoken. Even before deciding on this technique, it proved difficult to attribute particular stories accurately without incidentally building a biographical sketch that became transparently identifiable, or at least it seemed so to these men. Instead, to solve this, I have created a composite male elementary teacher, while the stories and quotes are all delivered verbatim, except where necessary to connect elements and finish sentences.

Without compromising their identities, I’d like to provide some biographical information on the men. I felt that it was important to get a sense of the kind of men I was interviewing, but describing them individually without revealing too many identifying characteristics was beyond challenging. My goal is to show the many traits and characteristics of my pool of teachers.
The Former Elementary School Teachers

I interviewed eight men. Seven of them were white. One was black. One indicated that he was Jewish. One had spent five years in the military prior to becoming a teacher. Five were married with children. Three were single. One indicated that he was an out gay man. They ranged in age from their late 20’s to early 50’s, and had years of experience ranging from three to over fifteen. Two of the men had varied skills from before become teachers, including stints as a machinist, welder, car salesman, millwright and engineering estimator, among other things.

Most had attended four-year colleges to acquire degrees in elementary education, while several had taken other routes to certification. One had a degree in the arts and was provided with “some kind of waiver,” as he put it, to teach art classes. They ranged in height from very short to six and a half feet tall, and included both lanky and substantial men, though I don’t think any of them could be considered to be obese. On average, they were somewhere between skinny and well-muscled.

All eight men taught in schools in the middle-Atlantic region of the Eastern United States, including Pennsylvania, New York, Maryland, The District of Columbia, Virginia, Delaware, and West Virginia. One also taught in the southern mid-west before quitting.

Most taught in more than one school over the span of their careers, and moved several times. They taught in rich, suburban districts and city schools with near-100% subsidized-lunch students. Some of them taught in rural districts with majority-subsidized-lunch students, and one taught in a public charter in a reasonably well-off suburban area. Five taught typical elementary

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2 Subsidized lunches are provided through a federal program for students whose families are considered low-income. The threshold for this classification varies by household size and changes annually. The percentage of subsidized-lunch students in a school is often used as a way of quickly delineating the type of students in a school (whether that makes any sense or not).
classrooms. Two taught art classes. One taught English and drama. Both of the art teachers said that one thing that set them apart from other teachers was that they taught every student in the school every year. They didn’t have one classroom of students that they got to know well. This gave them less depth of relationship with students, but more breadth. They both said this was not a benefit.

Only one of them expressed any desire to pursue work as a school principal or higher-level school administrator. That man intended to pursue school-subsidized education in this cause, but discovered that meeting all of the accompanying obligations was “ridiculously time-consuming,” negatively impacting his relations with his family, so he eventually dropped that plan, and soon thereafter dropped teaching altogether.

One met his future wife, a fellow teacher, in school.

After they chose to leave, most of these men found employment that they said they liked better than teaching, at least near the end, for reasons that will be highlighted below. It’s worth noting that they had been happy earlier in their careers as teachers in all cases, but became dissatisfied as they neared the end of their teaching tenures, so I purposely say they were happier than they had been near the end of their careers, rather than using a blanket statement suggesting they were happier than they had been as teachers in general.

Several of them quit without having another job lined up. They just had to get out. The others looked for new jobs during their last year as a teacher and lined things up so there was no gap in employment. Three of them had not, at the time of the interviews, found new employment. Remember, I looked for teachers who had quit relatively recently so these memories were fresh in their minds. It shouldn’t be surprising that some of them were still
unemployed. It hadn’t been that long.

Three of them left because of specific incidents while the other five claimed that the cumulative effect of the job was at fault. None of them left with full benefits. Most had none.

One of those claimed he probably would never work for anyone but himself again, except for contract jobs using his skills developed before he was a teacher. Another sounded wistfully like he probably wouldn’t work at all, but he was open to doing things if he proved able to help people. He claimed his wife worked and had health benefits and they were doing well and had things in order, so he wasn’t concerned. For those that were working new jobs, included among the places they were working are an educational software and tutoring center, a large university, the fossil fuel extraction industry, and a museum.

Talking to them, many different descriptors and characteristics were brought to mind. Words included melodious, peaceful, and soothing, as well as manic, deliberate, and angry. Types of people I was reminded of while interviewing them included a Zen master relaying profound insights, a thoughtful introvert, a comical actor, a fraternity brother, and a police officer. As a group, they were very well-spoken, articulate, friendly and surprisingly (to me) empathetic and compassionate.

Timing of Interviews

Before getting into the results, it should be noted that the interviews for this study were carried out in the late summer and fall of 2016 leading up to, and in some cases immediately after, one of the most contentious and probably consequential presidential elections of our lifetimes. The campaigns for this election included vitriolic and nationalistic rhetoric that divided
the nation and made people of all persuasions angry and filled some with fright. It is important to recognize that these incendiary social conditions may have colored some of the comments that the men interviewed for this study provided when conversations turned to their visions of how we might heal the nation, based on their observations from the elementary classroom. A reader might wonder why we discussed the healing of the nation when the research questions have to do with the thought-processes and reasons that these teachers left their jobs but as will become apparent, many of the reasons that these teachers claim as instrumental in their decisions to leave had to do with wider societal problems that reached into their elementary classrooms.

**A Note on Parentheses and Ellipses**

Throughout these transcriptions, I use an ellipsis, that is three periods in a row, like this … to mean a pause. In certain literary circles, when quoting other people’s work, an ellipsis is used to indicate that words have been removed. I have done that in the literature review section of this paper when needed to condense someone’s words. That is **not** the case in any of my transcriptions. In traditional novel writing and screenwriting, the ellipsis indicates a pause. That is how I will be using it here.

I also use parentheses (like this) to indicate my notes on what is being said. I use these to clarify things said by the men that may seem incomplete or confusing, or to expand on some kind of shorthand they used that they assumed I understood at the time of the interview, but which I am not sure my readers will universally understand. Additionally, the men sometimes switched personas, acting and speaking like someone else, in the middle of a story, a verbal technique called ventriloquation. I indicate who they were impersonating using parentheses. No words inside parentheses were spoken by the men.
I sometimes CAPITALIZE and **bold** words when the men said them loudly or intensely. Bold for emphasis. Capitals carry even more volume. They usually mean the speaker is very excited; possibly yelling.

**Development of Themes**

The goal of this section is to highlight themes that arose from the data using the analytical methods described earlier. Oftentimes this process is as simple as identifying recurring stories my participants told, while other times the themes were deduced from coding the transcribed texts. Deductions happen when participants tell stories that do not all contain the same elements but, when analyzed, all reveal the same underlying motivations or fall into the same code category.

This study is about these teachers coming to a decision to quit, so the focus is on the variables that they claim contributed to their decisions. In many cases, the themes reflect wider societal problems that affected these teachers and contributed to their desire to leave, but which they felt were beyond their control. They often indicated their desires to see these problems addressed, so there are stories here related to fixing the school system and the broader social systems holding society together. What follows is explication of those variables that emerged through my analytical process. I will provide verbatim clips and reduced narratives, as described earlier, to highlight instances of recurrent or emergent themes.

**Themes**

Frustrations that drove these men’s decisions to quit tended to originate in one of three categories: The Economy, the School System, and American Society.

- **The Economy** – This category is all about money and what affordances it creates or
fails to create, and how these men situate themselves relative to it.

- **The School System** – This category includes every frustration that begins with people inside the school system or in government making decisions about the school system. All of these themes had something to do with school policies and/or the particular way in which school personnel implemented policies.

- **American Society** – This category has to do with things that are not explicitly connected to the school system or the economy, but rather have to do with conditions in society created by our country’s history and public policies. These are things that happen outside the school system but whose effects are felt by teachers inside it. They all have to do with people.

Within these categories, the teachers’ stories fall into sub-categories or themes which are, in essence, my interpretations of their reasons for leaving. I have taken to calling them frustrations interchangeably with themes, because each of these themes led to feelings of frustration, aggravation, and eventually burnout. It is difficult to separate these themes into discrete categories because the structure of American society shapes everything else. The economic realities faced by teachers and families of school students are greatly influenced by the way our civic policies and politics shape our cities, schools, and society. The things we value as a culture influence how we fund our schools and what we choose to teach our students, as well as what we find unacceptable, disturbing, and creepy. Everything is part of a big cyclical system in which each part ultimately affects all other parts of the system.

There is no foundational element that shouts out to be heard above others. There are no definitive answers to my research questions. Rather, for these teachers, the process of deciding to leave is much more akin to the classic story of the camel being loaded until one little piece of
straw, the last straw, breaks the camel’s back. In several of these men’s cases, there was a pretty big straw placed on the pile that had been accumulating on their back, or rather weighing on their minds, while in others there was nothing specific, just too many bad things piling up past the breaking point. Each piece of straw is a theme. They are described below.

**The Economy**

No matter how bad a situation gets, there is almost always some amount of money that will make it tolerable. Every man has his price, as they say.

This category evolved to ultimately contain three themes. They initially seemed similar enough to be one theme, but my analysis eventually broke these pay-related issues into the following three themes that I was am now calling *Not Worth the Suffering, I Can’t Afford to Do this Job* and *I’m Worth More Than This*.

On the surface, these seem very similar, and indeed they are all different facets of not getting paid enough, but cognitively these are very different reasons. I’ll explain. I’ll start with the theme *Not Worth the Suffering*. As these men see it, there is an amount of “suffering,” as one man put it, that every teacher has to endure. This amount admittedly varies from person to person and from school to school, but each person has a limit. How that limit is reached (and for these men it was reached) is the crux of this dissertation. This theme has little to do with circumstances outside of the teacher’s mind. It is a discussion of the value of mental anguish.

As I continued with my analysis, however, it became clear that all suffering on the job comes from some kind of input that starts either inside the school system or in the society as a whole, the other two categories. The job not being worth the suffering is the output of these variables exerting pressure on the teachers. It is the effect. I was looking for the cause. For example, the suffering caused by mandated standardized testing and the preparation of students
for such testing certainly contributed to these men’s dissatisfaction, but the real culprit in that equation was the school system, not the pay. More pay could make the frustration tolerable, but not eliminate it. Consequently, each of the Not Worth the Suffering stories ended up falling into a different category, but the theme is worth keeping because attending to it could make tolerable any of those themes that ended up elsewhere. It is a sort of backstop to other themes. The value proposition of pay to mental anguish is something that all of my men eventually weighed in their careers. It usually took a few years to get to that point. I’m keeping it because it was always there. All of these teachers decided, for some reason or another, that teaching was Not Worth the Suffering.

The second theme, I Can’t Afford to Do this Job, is about how these teachers’ salaries limited their abilities to live what they considered to be a comfortable or desirable life. It has very little or nothing to do with the job itself. Instead, the stories that tended to have this theme embedded within them had to do with cost-of-living expenses like commuting and mortgages. It’s strictly economic. It tended to be presented as if the job and pay were fine; it was everything else that was too expensive. This theme was pervasive among these men.

The third theme in this category is called I’m Worth More Than This. This theme is about believing in oneself as a valuable human being with skills that are needed, and that the sacrifice made to acquire those skills has value. This is the proud claim of a confident, self-assured person; also sometimes a pompous, entitled jackass. Depends on how good they really are. With these men, it was less common to hear this claim, but it was sometimes there beneath the surface. It is a way of thinking about ones pay that is distinctly different from the other two themes in this category.

Since I have shifted all of the Not Worth the Suffering stories to other categories, I’ll start
with the second theme.

**I Can’t Afford to Do this Job**

I’ll start with the most explicit expression of this theme. It looked like this:

> “Let me try to say this in the most accurate way. I would do this job for the amount of money I was being paid…but I literally could not afford to do it. The year before I moved (to a cheaper area), I think the fact that I was teaching cost me more than living somewhere else and doing nothing. I’m not saying teaching costs me more than I make, though it does cost money directly out of your pocket, but that living where we lived and trying to pay all the bills at home made it more sensible to move without regard to employment. Am I making sense? It would not have been cheaper to quit my job and do nothing while still living there, but it would have been possible to live somewhere else, with no job, assuming my wife still worked, and come out ahead. Basically, what I’m saying is that I couldn’t afford to live where I taught. It was a losing proposition. I came out further behind every year.”

Another man who taught in a large city said:

> “It just wasn’t enough to cover the commute, which for me was pretty far, close to an hour each way, plus the rent, the bills, food, and everything else. Then I got into a car accident. I didn’t have enough money to replace my car, ‘cause it was old. I got a small payout, not enough to buy anything reliable, so I junked the car and started using mass transit. That took a long time. Like close to two hours now, each way. When it was all said and done, I felt like I was working 13-hour days to live in poverty in a place I didn’t even like. That just doesn’t cut it. Meanwhile, I liked the job. That’s the sad part.”

An example of the last theme in this category, *I’m Worth More Than This* came from a teacher who worked in a public charter school. He segues from *I Can’t Afford to Do This Job* with his mac and cheese and “beater car” comments to *I’m Worth More Than This* by the end.

Take a look:

> “It really wasn’t enough money to live on for a college grad with student loans. I went to college for four years, busted my butt to get good grades and did great student teaching, and I came out and was making less than a shift manager at Wawa. I was still living like a college student. I shared an apartment. I ate mac and cheese. Drove an
old beater of a car. But I was doing what I was supposed to be doing. It was a noble career. I was serving the public good. Changing lives. But after four years of that, it didn’t feel so noble. It felt like exploitation. It’s like you start to have this Stockholm Syndrome. You feel for your captors and want to help them. And I really did. I like them. They are truly nice people. But I had this realization that they weren’t helping me. I was helping them. But they were holding me captive. And I wasn’t getting paid enough for that. Public schools shouldn’t be a charity where teachers volunteer to help kids.”

This is a blending of two themes in one story. No one ever came out and explicitly said “I’m Worth More Than This,” but the implication this man makes is that he has sacrificed his time and money to become qualified for this job and still can’t live the life of a respectable adult. He’s still “living like a college kid.” He thinks he’s worth more than that.

**The School System**

The second thematic category that emerged as a cause of dissatisfaction had to do with conditions inside the school system. This is a big one. This is where all the action is. Stories showing this theme involved these men working with other teachers, dealing with the demands of administrators, school boards, state and federal mandates, and trying to satisfy paperwork requirements. I call this category *The School System.* There are numerous themes under this category. After all, the school system is where they worked. It clearly had a lot to do with how they experienced their jobs, and why they decided to leave them.

One of the first times these men experienced differentiated treatment came not from a problem, but a benefit:
**Unexpected Favoritism.**

These teachers experienced some surprising promotions early in their careers and got guided into leadership roles as soon as possible. In all but one case, they did not want this. They wanted to be teachers. Here is one example:

“When I arrived, the principal called me into his office. I thought I had already screwed something up. Even as an adult, you don’t want to go to the principal’s office. But no. He asked me to go fishing. I didn’t even know the guy. Had he asked the ladies to go fishing? No, he hadn’t. I found out later. I don’t even like fishing. But I went fishing. And that made the ladies not like me very much at the beginning.”

**Character Education is not Important to Schools**

As I sought to find the things that drove these men to leave, they sometimes told stories of things that made them want to stay. They told of times their children had intellectual breakthroughs, of emotionally powerful stories that moved them, and of projects that wowed them. Not a single man in my group of participants ever indicated that the students had anything to do with their reasons for quitting. What did contribute to their frustrations was that many of their most memorable and happy experiences were not important to the school. This theme is usually revealed at the end of a story.

One man told of a time when he watched something happen that amazed him.

“I had a girl in my class one year who was permanently confined to a wheelchair. She required special accommodations in the lunch room because the school building was built before the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed. It all worked fine, but she was the only kid who took the route she used through the lunchroom. One day, when the students were lining up for lunch, one of the popular girls was at the front of the line of able-bodied students and the girl in the wheelchair was waiting to be let in at her own entrance. I was standing between them, but closer to the long line of able-bodied students since that’s where kids got the most raucous. I noticed that the popular girl in front was looking over intently at the girl in the wheelchair. I looked at the popular girl and said, “I wonder how that makes her feel.”
I looked wistfully at the ceiling for a few seconds, then walked away, towards the back of the line to make sure the boys weren’t destroying anything.

The next day, several girls got in line behind the girl in the wheelchair and acted like it was a normal thing to do, and within a few more days, the entire class was using the handicapped door and following the girl in the wheelchair through the lunch line. That continued for the rest of the year.”

After another moment of reflection, he said:

“A few well-placed words at the right time, to the right student, changed my entire class forever.”

He gazed at the floor for a few seconds, then added

“That sort of thing doesn’t show up in the paperwork.”

**It’s about Character**

Martin Luther King once said:

“Intelligence plus character - that is the goal of true education.”

One of my interviewees put it another way:

“The thing is, knowing content doesn’t stop you from being an asshole.”

Another man extended this thought:

“We could go a long ways toward making this world a better place if people could find it in their hearts to be nice to each other.”

A third teacher said:

“Character is more important in life than content. Of course you need some content, but things will go much better for you if you know how to be a functional member of society, to interact with other people like an empathetic human being, than if you know how to draw a molecule or do long division.”
**Schools Don’t Value Caring Teachers**

A teacher who taught drama classes told a poignant story of how he gave a boy in his class a thank you note in which he told the student how impressed he was with him after the completion of a demanding project.

Years later, that kid’s mom came up to him and told him that her son still had that thank you note displayed in his bedroom. She described it as “one of his most prized possessions.”

That teacher got a little choked up recalling that incident. This moment of pride recalling his impact on the life of a student was tinged with a feeling of melancholy because he couldn’t help wondering whether getting a compliment from a teacher was so rare in some kids’ lives that they want to hold onto them for years. Whatever the case, he’s glad he took the time to do it.

He would like to spread the gospel of the power of compliments to as many teachers and other adults as possible. “This isn’t about coddling and participation trophies,” he says. “It’s about finding value in every child’s life and letting those children know that they matter and are appreciated.”

As the first man said earlier, a few words can have effects reaching far beyond the person who heard those words. “Imagine,” says the second man, “what could happen if we did that frequently and on purpose…to everyone.”

Interestingly, 2015-16 saw an outbreak of amateur videos traveling virally around social media in which high school teachers wander through a school building and compliment their students on whatever qualities those students have displayed in their classrooms or tell the students that they are important and that they inspire the teachers to come to work every day. These interactions invariably cause the students to smile, laugh, and sometimes cry. Looking at the students before and after the compliments serves as a simple reminder of the immediate positive impact of saying something nice, and meaning it, to almost anyone.
Examples of such a video can be found here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fFaJdBq78lc

and here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFLzjl9OZm4

**Schools Prioritize Their Own Success Over Students’ Wellbeing**

One teacher was disappointed when his principal forced him to stop having circle discussions with the class in which the students asked any questions they had that day and discussed possible answers and sometimes sought guidance about how to handle different situations that they were encountering outside of school. He indicated that these were some of the most thoughtful and thought-provoking interactions he ever had in the classroom, yet his principal said he “needed to check off more boxes on the standards list and circle time wasn’t cutting it.” He shook his head.

“That was one of the times I saw that we weren’t in service to the students. We were in thrall to the system. That’s not right.”

This idea came up often, that the things that are measured and against which quality of teaching is judged are not the things that are most important for students to learn and experience. In order to properly do this, these men said, we need to create nurturing, open environments in which creative inquiry and exploration can be undertaken without judgment.

One of them explained how he saw school priorities going askew when he said:

“The most important work of an elementary teacher is caring. We should be providing a safe place to converse, ask questions, get things wrong, explore. Instead, we have moved toward becoming a place in which we test, criticize, punish, and screen. I don’t want to be part of that.”
He wasn’t the only one. The concept of screening, or putting students into “tracks” came up often as an irritant to these men. The movement toward mechanized filtering of students into “buckets,” as one man called them, is what several of the men said contributed to driving them from their jobs. Whether it was “gifted, general, and needs improvement, or black, Hispanic, white or boys, girls, whatever,” this was clearly a sticking point for them.

That same teacher said:

“These are arbitrary groupings that shouldn’t mean anything. A kid’s race has nothing to do with his or her ability. If we actually wanted to figure things out and address them, we could go a lot further with more salient variables, like socio-economic class or number of parents, or words heard and spoken in the home before age five. But if we tracked those variables, we’d discover things that would require complicated, expensive, compassionate solutions instead of being fodder for racists and stereotypes.”

He stayed on this topic for several minutes, trying to reinforce how these groupings don’t solve anything.

“If a majority-minority school gets bad scores on a standardized test, what do we do?”

Me: “Close the school or pump more money into it?”

“Right. But that doesn’t change the families’ socio-economic status or the number of parents in the home or the number of words heard and spoken before age five, does it? No, but it makes us feel better because we tried. We did something. We generously gave something. Then later, when it fails to change the scores, we can say it didn’t work, blame the entire bucket of people, and figure out some way to give money to rich people instead.”

This last dig was a reference to corporate-run public charters and the funneling of public money into private schools by whatever means, and an interesting conversation followed that did not serve to answer the research questions, except as to highlight the way this man saw money corrupting almost every system in society. My reason for including this quotation is to show how
this teacher felt that the lumping of students into groups was solely to help the school report out its test scores and had nothing to do with providing the children with effective education. He cared about the kids and wanted them all to be treated equally. The school cared about looking good in its reports. The school’s misplaced priority here served as an irritant for this man, another one of the straws that broke the camel’s back, but it was not the last straw.

**Thwarted Expectations of Normalcy**

Many of the teachers noticed that they weren’t being treated normally. The students, the parents, and the administrators all treated them differently than what these teachers saw with female teachers. They had not been properly prepared for this. They were experiencing thwarted expectations of normalcy.

“It was like a kind of prejudice. I was labeled without cause.

There are all kinds of ways that cause people to treat you differently in life, different qualities that you may have, or different places you may go where people will treat you differently than they treat other people in those same places or under those same conditions.

Like if you’re a young black male in a retail establishment in a suburban white-managed mall, store clerks may pay extra attention to you and treat you suspiciously when you're there. Well, similarly, being a male teacher seems to cause people to behave suspiciously toward you when you are in the environment of the classroom. You, having not done anything, find it annoying. Unwarranted. Prejudiced.

I had that in the classroom. I didn’t notice it immediately. It was something I became aware of after a few years of teaching. I was dangerous.

As a large man in a room full of small children, I was seen as an inherently dangerous and potentially violent man. I never did anything violent in the slightest way the entire time I was there, but I bore…I was…I embodied the threat of violence. And that made people treat me differently.
I'm not saying that I have that everywhere in my life, that I have this problem. It's a...it's a domain specific area of prejudice or bias or...suspicion and I can understand why people who suffer under different kinds of suspicion in various parts of their lives feel like that is unfair...because it is.

You know how in life you go about your day expecting things to work in a certain way and for people to treat you a certain way but if they don't, you...you wonder why that's happening? And if you make the tiniest of mistakes...let's say you're at Walmart and while you're inside, some old farmer backs into your car with their truck and knocks out one of your taillights. You come out, don't notice the light because you come from the other side of the car. You hop in and drive away. Then, on the way home, you get pulled over by a cop. He asks for your license and insurance card. You can't find your insurance card. You have definitely paid for insurance but you forgot to print out the card and put it in your car because you have an online insurance company and they don't send you anything. And you don't own a printer. There's an expired one in there, but that's not good enough. You've never been pulled over so you don't really think about putting a new card in there. Now you get an extra fine, in addition to driving with a broken taillight.

And you literally have not done anything wrong. There is one thing that you didn't do exactly as the rules require, but you were obeying the spirit of the law. You had insurance. But you are getting punished because the paperwork isn't right. You get in trouble for something someone else did, then you get in more trouble because your paperwork isn't up to snuff, even though you did the thing the paperwork is about.

Now imagine feeling like that all the time, every day, like you're on the verge of being pulled over and fined for things that you have not done, because of conditions that you have not created. And that you may not have properly prepared for even though you think you did. That there are people watching you all the time, waiting for you to slip up. From what I have read about racial profiling, this is not unlike the feeling many people of color feel going through their daily lives. It is not a feeling anyone should have in a free and fair society.

And again let me just reinforce I am not saying that my life is like being a person of color. I'm just saying this aspect of my life bears some resemblance, the feelings I have in this part of my life, I think, are likely similar to the feelings of people who are under duress or are oppressed by society in small and undetectable ways...at least undetectable by everyone around them who is not in that group. Also, people who are not in the group don't believe you. They don't see this in their lives so it must not be in yours.
We'll, I assure you, it's there.

Shit, I hate to make this comparison, because again, this isn't me and it's way worse, but it's like...soldiers with PTSD. Racism is based on your appearance but PTSD, you can't see that. There is no outward evidence that anything is wrong. It's all in their head. And in a way, that's true! But the general meaning of 'all in your head' is that it is fake, or psychosomatic, or made up. Again, it isn't. It's real. There ARE things in their heads; memories of horrors, and neural connections and in some cases undetected brain damage, that cause people suffering with PTSD to have real, physiological experiences that make it hard for them to function in society. But people who weren't there with them, who don't know what it's like to be in the group, say "oh, they need to toughen up" or "they can't handle it." No. No.

No, that's just wrong.

When you repeatedly have bad things happen to you for reasons beyond your control and even with no connection to reality, with consequences that have no relationship to your behaviors, I swear to you it starts to mess with your mind in a physical way. It creates neural pathways that are not easily undone.

For ME, after what happened to me, for my much less serious version of this, still, what that means is that you are kinda hyper-alert, always on your toes, never trusting anyone.

So that's already not the best psychological space to teach kids from or provide them with the safe space they need to learn, to be that calm and confident presence that brings peace and comfort to the room. I remember the Dog Whisperer, Cesar, saying on his show that you need to be calm and confident to put dogs at ease and I remember thinking "It ain't just dogs, buddy!" But anyway, this...this mental state puts you on edge, it makes you want to...flee, to escape it, but you love the kids and you love what you are doing so you stay.

But then...when you add the actual claims of abuse because some kid got mad at you for giving them a bad grade, which I wish we didn't have to do, or telling them to do something they didn't want to do, then it escalates to lawsuits, and your employer doesn't even try to have your back? Then you fight the lawsuit, and win, and the school still doesn't want you back because of the bad mojo you carry with you in your baggage...All this despite you never having done anything wrong?

Then fuck you. I'm out.
And that is the big difference between me and people of color and soldiers with PTSD.

They don't have that option.

To leave.

But I did. And I did.”

I only noticed after the transcription was complete that this teacher never actually said what he thought his condition was that he was comparing to being black or being someone with PTSD. Based on the rest of his conversation and that of others, I concluded that his comparison to a person with PTSD was the most accurate reflection of his state of mind. He thinks of himself as having a lingering hyper-vigilance resulting from repeated threats and allegations of abuse through his career. But the racism aspect also bears some exploration as his outward appearance (as a man) seemed to bias people toward him in some way that he couldn’t fully put into words. It seems like a story about sexism would have made a better example for that but he didn’t do that. It’s possible that as a man, sexism was not something that readily came to mind because he doesn’t often notice it.

Shortly after conducting this interview, comedian Dave Chappelle hosted the television show Saturday Night Live and he gave a much-lauded monologue that helped the nation experience a moment of levity and calm after the presidential election that left many people in emotional distress. In that monologue, Chappelle, who is a very successful and wealthy black performer, discussed the idea of having the choice of whether to be black or not. He had been discussing police shootings of black men and the Black Lives Matter movement when he revealed to the audience “I’m gonna tell you right now, if I could quit being black today, I’d be out the game.”
I don’t think his point would be lost on the man who told the story above. There are some conditions a person might embody that make life in this society a lot less enjoyable and more dangerous than it is for other people who do not share those conditions. This teacher recognized that he could escape the environment that was manifesting the subtle but frightening oppression he felt, but the ability to freely escape from the oppressor does not justify the oppression. Just as with Chappelle, this man is implying that the best solution would be to treat everyone equally. But also like Chappelle, he doesn’t think it’s going to happen.

**Dwindling Autonomy**

Some teachers noticed, over time, that schools started to squeeze their schedules and hand down curricula “from on high.” They were seeing their control slipping away.

“Our autonomy as teachers got smaller and smaller as time went by. Not only was this less fun and less fulfilling, but I felt that it was serving the kids less well. And when you tell a guy who went into this job to help kids that he has to do stuff that doesn’t help kids, that’s not going to end well.

And it didn’t.

I couldn’t do what I wanted to do, which incidentally was what I thought was best for the students. We couldn’t have circle time, or chat, or talk about anything that might generate emotional intelligence. Meaningful interactions were not important to the school.”

Why?

“Because we had to pass the tests.”

“The goddamn standardized tests.”

**Testing Corrupts the School System**

One activity mandated by the school system that repeatedly came up with almost every
teacher was their dissatisfaction with their school’s approach to standardized testing.

“Tests are ruining our lives. We got into this because we love teaching. We love helping kids become amazing people. We love teaching kids what it means to be creative, smart, respectful, funny, curious, and everything else. Nobody goes into teaching because they love teaching kids how to take tests! If there is somebody like that out there, that’s terrible. Go do something else. I understand how tutoring centers pop up to teach kids to take tests. That’s fine, if there have to be tests. But school teachers should not spend all their time teaching kids how to take tests. Keep in mind that what I’m saying is NOT that we teach TO the test. We do spend a lot of time teaching the content that will appear on the tests, and that’s not so bad, but what we really do…now…is teach them HOW to take tests! Strategies for test-taking. The mechanical process of making sure they fill in circles correctly. Managing time during tests. How to reduce choices logically. When to go with their gut. Wtf? (He actually said the three letters.) That’s the sort of thing you should teach people once. That is not a valuable service to humanity. It has nothing to do with educating. They’re not learning ANYTHING during that time. That is gaming the system, and gaming the system is something people do when they can’t win by competing fairly.

There are no tests in real life. Life IS the test. If you are going to have a test like the driver’s exam or the bar exam, then teach to THAT test. I have no problem teaching to society's tests. But school systems should not be making up new tests and then spending all our time teaching kids how to take them.

Kids fail enough in life. We should teach them that failure is a step toward success. Even the most successful and famous people in the world fail repeatedly. But when ‘our’ funding — the school’s funding — and the teachers’ and administrators’ jobs hang in the balance of these little kids’ test scores, that is…that is…(long pause)…wrong.

It’s just wrong. It’s a corruption of the intent of the system. The end that the system has in mind should be one thing, but it has become another. It is supposed to be informed citizenship. Responsibility to self and others. Ability to function in society. It used to be that thing.

Maybe. Maybe it never was. I wasn’t there. Maybe I’m imagining a time that never existed except in books and movies. Maybe…”

It’s obvious that many of these teachers found the testing environment extremely aggravating. But it gets worse. The pressure is so high, schools cheat.
Testing creates cheating in the system

“Schools game the systems too. Principals game the system. Their jobs, their funding, depend on it. Of course it will be gamed. Look at all the news stories of teachers and administrators changing kids’ answers on state tests. It is a guaranteed outcome of this current system. It’s like that Wells Fargo thing. Or the S&L crisis. Did you see The Big Short? Have you read Chain of Title? How about Volkswagen’s Deiselgate? You’re from Penn State…how about the Sandusky Scandal? That’s why people didn’t talk. Their money depended on it. Or Lance Armstrong… The best biker in the world. He cheated. The Russian Olympic drug-use scandals, or Sharipova and every-other-athlete-in-every-sport-on-meldonium scandal. Hell, did you know that even professional SNOOKER players had a drug scandal?3 That’s not even physically demanding! But! Every system where people get paid based on outcomes will be cheated. It is guaranteed. If the system creates cheaters, the system is the problem. Sure, the individual cheaters are doing the wrong thing, but oftentimes the system incentivizes cheating and disincentivizes calling attention to the problem! Like the people at Wells Fargo who raised red flags about how the work environment was generating…unethical behaviors, they got fired! That’s a pretty big disincentive for someone inside the system to point out that the system is badly designed. And these weren’t just whistle-blowing goodie-goodies. These were people who were trying to protect the company from financial collapse!

(pretending to be a manager at Wells Fargo) “No, we don’t want that. We want you to do what we say, not prevent the collapse of the entire company. That’s not your job.”

(Back to being himself) Then we’re surprised to find ourselves in a political culture in which gaming the system is rampant, and losing is considered to be either a lie, a corruption of the system, or a failure to have gamed it enough? We have real Gerrymandering, some of the worst in our history; we have outrage over nonexistent vote rigging, we have judicial gridlock, we have politicians who inherently must serve moneyed interests because of the way the system works…and this is all because our country is filled with systems that incentivize those behaviors.

You know why people cheat in sports by doing drugs? Because you can’t get away with cheating in the GAME. They can’t cheat at the

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3 I had not heard of this so I attempted to find evidence of a connection between snooker and performance-enhancing drugs. It was a real thing. Find more in the book Drugs in sport by D. R. Mottram (2003).
activity, so they cheat inside their bodies. The rules and enforcement are sufficiently rigorous that the incentives to cheat while playing are not sufficient to create that behavior. That shows that it is possible to create systems in which cheating is impossible or at least extremely rare.

Then to top it off, we aren’t allowed to tell kids how corrupt everything is. We have to lie. The world is a huge structural lie. Good doesn’t always win. Meritocracy doesn’t exist outside of school. Magic doesn’t solve problems. Physics is real. There are causes and effects and sometimes it gets really complex. Don’t fall for simple answers. Listen to knowledgeable people. Recognize that everyone isn’t knowledgeable. Learn how to tell the difference. You kids need to know!”

The point he’s trying to make here is that cheating is common in all walks of life. Sports and business are riddled with stories such as the ones he cites. His implication is that if a system creates cheating, the designers of the system are partially to blame. The current incarnation of the school system incentivizes cheating, therefore it needs to be reformed. We are putting our children into a system that values cheating, while at the same time we cannot tell the children that cheating is a reality in American life. In fact, we tell them not to do it with an accompanying threat of severe penalties if they do. His anger at the hypocrisy of this is hard to capture in text, but his delivery made it clear.

**Feelings of Entrapment**

School wasn’t just tough on the emotional health. It had a physically confining reality to it.

“School is like jail. And I’m not talking about the kids, although it’s definitely jail for them. It’s like jail for us too. You are enclosed in a cell. You are being watched all the time. Your day is prescribed.”

I didn’t get universal mentions of the entrapment issue, but where it became more obvious was in stories the men told about the time after they found new jobs.
After the men quit, they experienced the unexpected joys of freedom. They hadn’t realized what they were missing. They were shocked to discover that they could move about the world. They could go to the bathroom when they wanted to. No one was watching them anymore.

**The Surprise of Freedom**

It wasn’t always clear to the teachers that they were in a confining environment as teachers. They had expectations all along of teaching in an enclosed classroom inside a school building, so it was not particularly unsettling. That is until they left.

“When I started at my new job, I had this incident where I was going to go to the bathroom and I told my office mate. He was like “What are you telling me for?” I’m like “In case anybody wants to know where I went.” He says “No one cares where you go.” I’m sure I had a really…dumb look on my face. My jaw hit the floor. I headed to the bathroom mumbling “they don’t care where I go?”

Not long after that, one of my office mates asked me to go to lunch. I had brought my lunch every day up to this point. He’s like “Let’s go” I’m like “what…just leave?” He goes “Yeah!” like it was a stupid question. I go “won’t somebody get mad?” He says “Dude, you could go to lunch for two hours and no one would say shit.” Again, I was like “but…but…there’s work to do.” He says “It’ll still be here when we get back.” It was just…everything was so shocking.

I was so amazed that I could walk around the office and go to the bathroom or even go outside whenever I wanted. I was experiencing freedom. And I liked it. But I didn’t know what I was missing. I felt like I was in a kind of jail as a teacher, but I didn’t realize that other jobs weren’t like that. It was like I was born in captivity and I didn’t know there was any other way to live.

It’s like…The fish only notices the water when it isn’t there. Only in reverse…I guess. That’s not really right. I didn’t know what I didn’t have until I had it.”
The Structure of American Society

These men all explained that from their vantage points as elementary teachers that they saw flaws in, or perhaps an unravelling, of our social fabric. They had front row seats to many of the human-centered problems that existed in the societies in which they were a part. Most of them worked in multiple school districts in their careers with students from vastly different socio-economic populations, so they saw problems (or the effects of problems) spanning the spectrum of socio-economic status and culture.

The way I have conceived this category is that these themes happen to teachers with sources outside the school system. This includes things that children do because of their home life, interactions with parents, and wider issues that affect them like how the media and politicians portray teachers, and how our social safety net functions. Many of these things may happen in the school, but they are not caused by the school system.

First and foremost is a theme I’m calling Bad Homelife:

“Some of the kids have really shitty lives. That hurts me. A lot of those are poor kids. Not all of them. Some rich kids have idiot parents. They just have money. Different kind of problems. Whatever their income, some of these kids are in bad situations.”

One of the consequences of this is:

“These kids need a father figure and you are it. A father figure is a man who cares about you…and acts like it. You become a little too important to them. It’s good for them to have someone like you, but then they move on and you aren’t there anymore. Plus, you can’t be there for all of them as they accumulate over the years.”

Embedded in the above quotation is an idea that we will see numerous times in this section. These teachers thought that they could help individual children much more effectively if only they were able to become more parent-like. To achieve this, they would have needed more
time or to have more money or not have families of their own. The subtext (not always far beneath the surface) was that if they could adopt these kids, things would be a lot better for the kids but they didn’t really think that was an option. They imagined it as a solution, but knew it was a fantasy. There’s a bit of a stifled hero complex hiding here. They want to help but they feel like they can’t. If the success of the Pixar movie The Incredibles, whose protagonist is a stifled superhero who works a desk job at an insurance agency is any indication, this is a common feeling among men of a certain age. For my participants, the type of heroics they wished they could perform was obvious. As we will see, the inability to adequately help a child in need was a major frustration for them.

This chronic poverty of families affects all teachers, male and female, where it exists but there’s one variable that seems to affect men teachers more and in different ways. Almost all of my participants mentioned this issue in one way or another and thought it needed to be attended to in more devoted ways than what our society has done recently.

**Single Mothers Need Help**

Every single man I interviewed mentioned without prompting that one of the biggest emotional challenges they encountered was dealing with the terrible weight of sending children home to situations and conditions that they argued no child should have to witness or endure. In almost all the cases they mentioned, the homes were headed by single mothers. Interestingly, none of these men had anything bad to say about the mothers. They were all, to a man, generous and acknowledging of the difficulties of raising a child as a single parent without much money. (That I find this surprising might say more about me than them but I was surprised because in my other duties in life, I encounter a lot of men who do not acknowledge the difficulties of low-income people. These teachers do not, anecdotally, fit the norm.) Even with conversational
goaded, I could not get them to say anything bad about the mothers. Fathers and boyfriends were a different story. Of the moms, they would say things like “They are doing the best they can.” “They work hard, sometimes more than one job, so they can’t always be home when their kid needs them. That’s hard to complain about.”

If the mothers were worthy in these men’s eyes, why was it so emotionally difficult? I’ll let another story do the talking.

“Imagine that you had a short relationship with a beautiful, slightly hard-looking woman about ten years ago, but you broke up because she didn’t…share your vision of the future. You never quite clicked because her background made her skeptical and a little bit vindictive. So ten years pass. Then, one day, this nine year old girl shows up in your class on the first day of school. She is funny, friendly, and smart - just adorable. You get to know her over the course of several weeks, and you realize that she is a wonderful little person. Then it’s time for your first parent-teacher meeting of the year and this woman, your old girlfriend, comes in with this girl. She’s the only parent there for this girl. Your eyes lock. You look at the kid. Back up at the mother, you do some quick math…and you say, quite to yourself…oh shit.

They have a different last name than when you knew her. There was something about the kid that was familiar but you never thought it was THAT!

Now you know. But you also have a family, a wife and small child. You can’t say anything. Are you sure she’s yours? Are you? Her mom acts like nothing unusual is happening. What are you gonna do? There would be all kinds of public shaming if it was discovered that you, an elementary school teacher, had an illegitimate child in this conservative community, especially with this woman who doesn’t have the greatest reputation now. So you keep quiet.

But then one day the girl comes in and she has a bruise on her arm and she doesn’t have that twinkle in her eye like she used to. A couple more days go by and she seems more sullen than ever. You ask her what’s up. After some cajoling, she reveals that her mom has a new boyfriend and he isn’t very nice.

Now remember that you love this kid. You have been treating her like she is your kid!
What would you do?

What would you WANT to do?

Eventually I find out enough that what I want to do is go over there and punch that fucker in the face and grab the kid and get her out of there. But that’s not legal. Can’t do that. But then none of the legal procedures are going to work. That girl, your daughter, is stuck living in a house with an overworked mom, her abusive idiot of a boyfriend, not enough money to buy enough food or solve all the problems that money can solve, and no one with time and inclination to help her reach her potential. In fact, what is going to happen, and this is backed up by plenty of observational research, is that they are going to put her into conditions that are likely to have her end up pregnant at 15, and living in subsidized housing with a boyfriend who is in jail five years after that.

So here you are, with all the resources you need to solve this problem, staring at this girl at the end of the school day, and she is sitting in front of you crying, saying she doesn’t want to go home, that she wants to go home with you. She just wants someone to take care of her who cares. You have demonstrated that you care. She doesn’t want to be a burden or an afterthought. You are the one person in her whole life who has acted like you really care. And it’s not an act. You do care. A lot.

And do you know what you’re going to do?

Nothing.

You can’t do SHIT to help her.

She is doomed to the life you foresee.

Sure, child services may eventually kick that guy out of the house, but that’ll make her mom mad at her because that guy helped pay the bills.

You can recommend after-school programs but her mom doesn’t let her go to those. They don’t go to church. There is no…respite. No…(shakes head)…no…help. No one in her life who fucking cares!

She may meet a few other teachers who care along the way, but there just aren’t enough of them in her day. Where else will she meet people who care? Not enough of her time is spent with people who will lift her up and provide opportunities and show her all the ways life can be good; people who will show her career options she didn’t know existed;
people who will teach her how to navigate life as a young adult. People who take her to visit colleges.

Ugh. It’s a huge society-wide problem.

So you send her home to be verbally and probably physically abused…and maybe even sexually abused by this asshole of a boyfriend.

And you die a little bit every day.

Imagine that happening day after day. Year after year. Some days I would go home and guzzle a bottle of wine and collapse face-down on the bed. It is…terrible. It is…like having your heart ripped out and stomped on.

Every day.

How much is that worth? That’s a hard thing to quantify. How much would you pay not to have your heart broken?

Repeatedly.

I loved the job and loved the kids. But there is no way in heck I’m ever going back.

It isn’t my kid, okay? But I FEEL like it’s my kid. I LOVE these kids. I want them to have good lives and opportunities and fun.

It just…it revealed the cracks in our society that I think we are afraid to talk about.

Things like…single mothers shouldn’t have to shack up with assholes to make ends meet.

Kids shouldn’t have to go home to empty houses because their parents are working two or three jobs, or wacky shifts.

Kids shouldn’t be starving in this country. But they are. There are hungry kids in this country, all over the damn place.

Kids don’t deserve any of this. They aren’t mean, they aren’t lazy, they aren’t incompetent, they aren’t responsible for the conditions they live in. They can’t be expected to live a responsible life when this is all they know. Can they? I mean, seriously?"
Another teacher told of similar internal conflict:

“We have the power to save the world, at least one kid at a time, but we can’t because of societal norms and expectations. It’s the story of every superhero. Gotta keep a low profile or you’ll become a target. Have an alter-ego. In real life, in this century, that’s almost impossible. So you’re stuck with reality. Reality. It’s sad. You can’t save these students without really good social services and social services don't really do a great job of saving them either. Have you ever heard a kid say they loved those social services? Man, that foster system was great! Of course it IS great for some kids, and foster parents are a godsend, but my God…we need an army of them. And like any large group of parents, some of them are not great. I know that sounds rude. I’m really not trying to badmouth foster parents. It’s all people. But I know parents. I worked with a lot of parents. Trust me when I say they are not all great.

But you see…here’s an opportunity. Single mothers don't need foster parents. They need foster husbands! Or if that’s too traditional or patriarchal for you, foster Au Pairs or foster grandparents or foster roommates! Foster allomothers. Someone to HELP the mother. Foster drivers. Fucking foster Uber! We can’t take the kids from them. We don’t WANT to take the kids from them. They are, in many cases, really good mothers. If they just had enough help and money, things would be good. Our government tries to help with the money part but the helping part is shit. That’s where we could really make a difference. Free after-school programs with talented and dedicated staff that DO stuff, MAKE stuff, teach skills, not just have supervised play time. Free daycare for working mothers. Transportation to get the kids anywhere so kids don’t have to forgo good opportunities and programs. The Big Brothers and Sisters programs are an attempt to meet this need too, but again it is volunteer and we need millions of them. Literally. How much do we value things if we have to ask for volunteers?

Live-in help. Free, capable and qualified live-in help. That would be freaking incredible.

I know it’s a fantasy. But it’s a hopeful fantasy. It’s an optimistic fantasy. Thinking about the reality of the situation is…depressing. It’s…it’s…umm…

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4 I had to look up the meaning of this word, allomother. It is a term used in certain social species like many mammals and birds to describe the care that some non-parental animals provide for babies of a different mother. In this man’s use, I took it to mean another woman helping to raise a child with a level of care equal to what she would provide for her own child.
Is there a word for seeing something so depressing that it makes you suicidal?

Maybe...I remember seeing a word on Facebook not long ago...Japanese maybe. Cube-something. It was on a list of unusual emotions. Anyway, when I read the definition, I thought “that’s it! That’s what I am experiencing.”

After some searching on the internet, I discovered that the word to which he was referring is “kuebiko,” whose definition was created by John Koenig, the author of *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*, as one of many unnamed emotions for which we need a name (Koenig). It is interesting that my participant used this word, because he is reinforcing the need for such new words. The definition of kuebiko, as listed in the *Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows* is as follows:

n. a state of exhaustion inspired by acts of senseless violence, which force you to revise your image of what can happen in this world—mending the fences of your expectations, weeding out all unwelcome and invasive truths, cultivating the perennial good that’s buried under the surface, and propping yourself up like an old scarecrow, who’s bursting at the seams but powerless to do anything but stand there and watch.

The teacher continued,

“It’s the grinding, unstoppable nature of it all that wears you down. The lack of effort we put forth as a society to help people.

And I don’t want to get too political, but the explicit disrespect many conservatives have for the poor is absolutely enraging.”

**This is Solvable. But it Won’t be Solved.**

In the face of this hopelessness, there was defiance. These teachers wanted to do a very masculine thing. Fix the problem.

“It isn’t that you can’t solve the problem. It’s that you are not ALLOWED to solve the problem. Society does not WANT you to solve the problem. Which sucks because the problem almost literally cries out for a solution.”
There came a time when it all became too much. The teachers mentioned turning a corner. They no longer felt upbeat and hopeful. The end was near.

“You know you are on your way out, or you should be, when you stop talking about which kids are going to be stand-up comedians and writers and politicians, and you start making bets about who will be pregnant before they graduate and who’s gonna be the first one to end up dead or in jail.”

**Unwanted Advances**

Possibly spurred on by the lack of good men in some of the school districts in which these men worked, another frustration was mentioned several times. The problem of being attractive to single mothers. This was not universal, but it happened enough that it’s worth mentioning.

“When you are a man with a job and you’re good with kids, that seems to be sufficient to attract some moms. In the one school where I worked, these women didn’t see a lot of men with jobs, first of all, so that alone was probably good enough. I don’t even think physical appearance would matter, though I’m sure there’s some lower limit.”

I asked how that affected his day. He said:

“it made things uncomfortable during parent-teacher conferences sometimes. Like this one time I had a mom show up in a…provocative outfit. And she was definitely putting the moves on to see if I was interested.”

“How did you handle that,” I asked?

“I act disinterested.” He replied, in the present tense, as if it is still happening.”

“How’d that work for you?” I continued.

“It was hit or miss, to be honest. Being disinterested is one of the laws of attraction at the beginning of a relationship. It makes you appealing. But I don’t know what else to do. You can’t act interested! It’s a Catch-22.”

A different man reported that he once had to take out the “school’s equivalent of a restraining order” to keep one woman from coming to his classroom.
“She was required to check in at the office, and they were instructed to not let her come back to my classroom, but she still made it in a few times. Even came in a back door once. It was getting a little too Fatal Attraction there for a while, but we eventually got it under control and it all worked out. She wasn’t evil. Just persistent.”

**Lack of Respect**

Another frustration voiced by these former teachers was that **society doesn’t respect teachers**. These men reported that politicians bad-mouth them. The media sometimes overplays bad stories. There are cultural idioms like “If you can’t do, teach.” They don’t get paid much compared to other skilled laborers. Meanwhile, teacher’s colleges will take almost anybody, so they don’t have a whole lot of room to defend themselves.

One teacher talked about how the respect problem arises partially from their inability to speak the truth.

“Now we can’t even teach kids how to function in society because society is so fucked up. Our businesses and our institutions are corrupted, dysfunctional systems. And schools can’t teach kids that! We are not allowed to explain where the lies are. We are so constrained. We can’t say something is wrong even though every single educated person knows that it’s wrong because it might offend some kid’s parents. It might reveal some truth that they wish to keep hidden. No one can agree on anything anymore. We can’t even agree on a common foundation of things every American child should know. How hard is that? I mean...let’s say you have 50% of the day in every American classroom, leaving the other 50% for each state or school district to plan. What do you think are common things that every student should know, regardless of state or race or political affiliation of their parents? Should every child know how to add and subtract numbers? To make change or identify if they have gotten the right change back when purchasing things or selling things? To write legibly? To write and speak using words that make sense to other people? To have the ability to critically determine when something is true or not? Does any of that strike you as a bad idea? Can we agree that those are all good things for every American child to know?

No. We cannot. There can be nothing that we will agree on. Not only that. If you try this, it will be declared the stupidest fucking thing in the world. A huge waste of time and money. (He becomes a critical parent) ‘You are a goddamn idiot for thinking you know what is best
for my kid! You aren’t from around here. You don’t know what we need to know here.’

(Becoming himself talking to the parent) ‘But all I’m suggesting is that every child learns how to write sensible sentences in English…’

(parent) ‘Shut the fuck up, you piece of shit!’

(Back to himself in the present) After enough of that, you start to think maybe this isn’t working. Maybe I’m not making a difference. Maybe everything I understood to be right…is wrong.

So I had to quit.

I couldn’t take it anymore.

I still really can’t. I don’t think I’ll ever have a full-time job again. I’ve pulled back the veil and seen the Matrix for what it is…and I can’t be part of it anymore.”

Another teacher said:

“Society doesn’t respect the whole field of education, especially now. And it’s getting worse. We’re becoming anti-intellectual.”

I asked “Who is ‘we’?”

“America. The people. There is a large swath of people who now think that being educated is bad, or at least educated beyond high school. Mostly by people who were not educated beyond high school, as far as I can tell. They consider education to be a form of brainwashing. As long as we stick to the basics, it’s usually okay, but if you try to get the kids to start analyzing things and critiquing real things, people…parents mostly, start to complain. The kids are usually fine. It’s the fucking parents. If you teach evolution to conservative Christian kids, you get in trouble. If you teach global warming to kids whose parents work in the oil business, you get in trouble. You can’t even teach math anymore without getting in trouble. If it is different in any way from what the parents learned, there will be blood.

That’s not a good way to start the day. It’s hard to earn respect when your job requires you to smash ignorance. And not just any ignorance, but willful ignorance based on economic survival. If these people, the parents we’re talking about, learn the truth, it threatens their entire existence. Their way of life. Their livelihood. So they do not want to learn that and they don’t want their kids to learn that. You, as a teacher,
are a government-funded agent of disinformation (to these parents’ ways of thinking). That gets kinda frustrating after a while.”

One man who worked in an economically prosperous school district in the suburbs of a large metropolitan area spoke of another component of the respect problem:

“My salary is public so everybody knows what I make, and it’s about one-third or one-fourth what the parents of my students were making…that’s not gonna get you any respect. They look at that and say, geez, is that the best he can do? And he’s teaching my kid?

Who wants a loser willing to settle for that salary teaching their kids?”

Me: How would we fix that?

“There’s only one way. Pay more. But then you need to make it harder to become a teacher. You need to screen out the low performers and the low-passion people. It has to be like becoming anything else that’s hard to do. You get paid more because you are good at it and because you are qualified to do it. The way you get qualified is to go through the damn gauntlet. (Teacher prep) College has to be hard. People have to drop out. Instead of elementary ed becoming the catch-all major for people who drop out of engineering and physics, it should be the place where the smartest college kids start, and then people start dropping out INTO engineering from there. Then…we would have something.”

Me: “How would we pay for that?”

“We’d pay for it by valuing education more than war. By valuing education over subsidizing multinational businesses. By providing schools with the funds they need to operate with higher teacher salaries. By not letting the government slash funding by huge percentages every couple of years such that a school can’t effectively plan for the future. Teacher pay is a highly predictable expense. It isn’t hard to plan for if you value it as a high societal priority. It’s totally possible. Other countries do it.

One of the problems is that we have teacher shortages so we make it EASIER to become a teacher so we can fill those rolls. Well, hey, guess what? We have a shortage of engineers in this country too. I don't see it getting any easier to become an engineer! I don't see engineering firms saying “Hey, anyone with a degree in ANYTHING can quickly become a certified engineer.” But that’s what we do with teaching.
If they raised the pay, they wouldn’t have shortages. If they make it harder to become a teacher, they eliminate the respect problem, and justify the pay.

You know like half of teachers quit in the first couple years, so maybe if the degree was harder, we could weed them out earlier and not have the horrible turnover, and also make sure that only people who really wanted to do this made it through.

Then you have to create a system in which it isn’t hard to eliminate bad teachers so there can be no claims of people riding out their careers or people just doing minimal work for the good money, the good money that only exists in this fictional world I’m describing, and we might be getting somewhere.

At the same time, you have to protect the good teachers from the kind of crap I went through at the end. It’s a tall order for sure. And with half the voting population essentially against education, it’s never going to happen. I do not regret leaving.”

It’s never going to happen, he said. This country will never respect teachers enough to pay them an amount that will make teaching a desirable career for any but the most civic-minded individuals. Sadly, a lack of respect is not the end of it. It gets worse.

**The Spectre of Impropriety**

These teachers were very cognizant of the possibility that they could be perceived by other adults to have an unseemly attraction to children or worse, to be accused of physical or sexual abuse. They employed extensive efforts to prevent that, but the spectre of impropriety was always hovering nearby.

“We are dangerous. We might be pedophiles or violent abusers.”

But what’s interesting is that they are simultaneously violent and vulnerable. They have the power to kill any child in their classroom with their bare hands in seconds, but they can also have their own lives ruined by a few tossed-off words from one of those same children.

“We will be accused of abuse. It may not be sexual abuse because we’re super careful about that now, but physical abuse only takes a
moment. One swat of a backhand or a little push of a kid into a door. Who would see that? He slipped!”

He looked at me with suspicion in his eyes.

“We don’t DO those things, but see how easy it is to start wondering whether we did?”

All a student has to do is say an incident happened like those he just described, and these teachers will be in a world o’ hurt.

In addition to avoiding any appearance or implication of physical violence, male teachers must also avoid any appearance of physical affection. It’s not the affection that’s the problem. It’s the intent perceived by other adults.

“We cannot even have the implication of attraction to the kids. Affection looks like attraction from someone else’s vantage point.”

The tactic that every single man used to avoid claims of sexual impropriety and violent abuse was to avoid any physical contact with the kids beyond a high five or fist bump.

**Just Say No to Hugs – The Threat of Being Hugged**

One universal meta-story that arose from my participants involved the seemingly comical threat of being hugged by children. I am calling this a sub-theme of *The Spectre of Impropriety* because it is not independently frustrating. It is only frustrating as a consequence of the potential for hugging to be perceived as improper or unseemly and ultimately result in accusations. This sub-theme is one that I found terribly interesting. I had not encountered it in my literature review as I prepared for the interviews, yet there it was, in every man’s stories. To those who do not work with elementary-aged children, it may not be a well-known fact, but kids naturally respond to adults they love with hugs, and if their teachers are nice and supportive people, the kids love them. Parents rarely think about how it looks to others when they hug their own kids. Truth be
told, most adults probably don’t think twice about parents hugging their own kids. But male teachers know (or think, with great confidence) that they will be treated differently if people see them hugging children too often. We’re going to have to get a bit indelicate here, because the reality is indelicate. The problem is that hugs by children in the lower grades often put the child’s head in the most inappropriate of places for the adult male teacher. Even if a teacher were okay with the idea of giving or receiving hugs, these men’s fears of the perceptions of other adults concerning child molestation or perversion were enough to eliminate any possibility that such perceptions could occur, by attempting to prevent all hugs.

But it’s harder than it seems. There is one group of huggers more problematic than the rest. To hear these men tell it, fifth grade girls are unstoppable hugging machines. They are the Terminators of hugs. They don’t feel mercy, or remorse, or pain. And they will not stop. One of the men who was of short stature had one additional problem with fifth grade girls beyond the pervasive nature of their hugging.

“They have these growth spurts around that time that make them a bit taller than me, and they also start to develop their…lady lumps. So NOW, in addition to the general problem of hugging, I have these tall girls shoving my head into their bosoms. I don’t know what the heck. Am I a stuffed animal? Does me being short make me seem extra lovable? Whatever it was, it was dangerous. I had to make it quite clear that I was not to be hugged under any circumstances once I started to recognize that as a problem.”

One of the burly men quipped:

“I got very good at side hugs. You see one coming, whoosh, quick twist. Pat pat. Bye bye.”

Another added, holding out his hands in a “stay back” motion:

“I literally had to run from hugs on several occasions.”

Yet another said:
“I made it clear that I was not a physical guy and that hugs were off limits. Find someone else. Didn’t matter. It was like having a puppy in the room. Girls have to hug it. It’s like a genetic predisposition. Except I’m the puppy.”

The stories I heard from these men about the struggle to avoid being hugged by students struck me as the key to an important point. It became clear as the stories piled up, even proving to be universal with my participants, that perceived sexual impropriety was a huge threat to their careers, and they were well aware of it and had been told or trained to completely eliminate any possible situation that might be misconstrued as inappropriate. My literature review had suggested that such perceptions were a problem, but it seemed that these men were sufficiently aware of it that they avoided any such accusations.

I’d like to show a pair of brief videos here to compare the differences between a male teacher and a female teacher doing the same activity. Each of these teachers had independently developed a tradition in which they welcomed each child to their classroom with a custom handshake. It’s a very cool and caring tradition that shows the students that their teachers know each one of them as an individual. These videos have each been viewed millions of times on multiple platforms; over 60 million views combined at the time of this writing. Given what you’ve just read, I probably won’t have to draw your attention to the differences between these two videos, but take a look:

Male Teacher:
https://www.facebook.com/TeamLBJ23/videos/1117360995039724/

Female Teacher
https://www.facebook.com/kwchnews/videos/10154999609132421/
It wasn’t just hugs

The threat of perceived sexual impropriety wasn’t limited to hugs. Several men told of how they would not touch any student in any way except to give “high fives.” They believed that they could not so much as pat someone on the shoulder for a job well done. They certainly couldn’t have children sit on their laps.

Even being in the boys’ bathroom while students were in there was considered to be a very risky thing to do. As a result, most teachers have “iron bladders.” Never needing a bathroom break at all was considered a valuable skill. These men didn’t want to leave the classroom unattended to go to the bathroom when it was likely to be empty, and predetermined class change times (in schools in which classes changed) were when students used the bathroom. Those teachers who had access to a “teachers only” restroom were very thankful for it.

One teacher told this story:

“One time, I sent a group of boys to the bathroom. They came back and said ‘Noah’s having a problem in the bathroom and probably needs help.’ So I head down there, stick my head in the door and I find Noah crying and fiddling with his pants. He says his zipper is stuck. On him, if you know what I mean. I told him to unzip it and start over. He said he couldn’t. He’s crying in pain and frustration. The logical thing for me to do was go in there and fix it. I was still outside the door. I looked up and down the hallway. (He looks left and right.) No one’s there. I looked back in the bathroom. This is where I had several visions run through my head of how this would all shake out. No pun intended.

I go in. I have to look closely to see what’s going on with the zipper. I get down on my knees. I have the two sides of his pants, you know, where the button and zipper is, in my hands. Then I go to grab the zipper tab and I try to move it but it is actually stuck, so I’m trying to see if there’s something misaligned or what’s going on exactly, and that’s when Mrs. D, the principal, pokes her head in to see what all the commotion is about. There before her, she sees a third-grade boy screaming, and me kneeling in front of him with my hands on his zipper and my face in his crotch. She gasps. My head snaps around to look at her. I have a shocked and terrified look on my face, because I
know what she’s thinking. She reads that look as guilt and shame. Why would I be scared if I wasn’t doing anything wrong?

Freeze that image in your mind. That was my first vision. It was like my life flashing before my eyes except it hadn’t happened yet. And that was only the first one.

I didn’t go in. I told him to hang on. I’d go get the school nurse. Who is a woman.

And there is one of the weirdest ironies of it all. A guy teacher has to send a woman into the boys’ restroom to help a boy get his zipper unstuck from his private guy parts because if a guy does that, he will be accused of something while the woman will not.”

I asked him what one of the other scenarios that ran through his head was.

“That I go in and get it unstuck. It’s all good. He goes home and tells his parents what happened at school, including that I helped him get his zipper unstuck. And they ask if him if I had my hands in his pants and he says yes. Then the parents then sue me.”

“For what?” I asked.

“Child molestation.”

Me: But you didn’t molest him (in this hypothetical scenario).

“Right. And that will probably come out in the investigation, as long as no one coaches him and inceptions him (plants a false memory). But…even if I win, that starts the ball rolling that I am a child molester. I was alone in a bathroom with a kid and I had my hands in his pants. That much is true. And there’s no coming back from that. Even if you aren’t.”

Me: “So you feel like you can’t do anything to help?”

“Right. (long pause) Actually, that sums up a lot of my life as a teacher.”

Unfounded Allegations of Abuse
Despite the absence of accusations of sexual misconduct, three of my eight participants claimed that the most influential factor in their departures involved allegations of physical abuse and the resulting conflict with school administration.

The art teacher’s story had the most immediate effect of any of the three. He tells it like this:

“I had a girl come into my class who had an IEP (individualized Education Plan). I was not fully apprised of what was in this IEP. I don’t know why I wasn’t apprised, but probably because I was an art teacher and they couldn’t tell me the entire contents of every kid’s IEP who had an IEP. Art teachers are all over the freakin’ place.”

This echoed the other art teacher’s description of having to teach the entire school, not just one class. Every student in all grades takes art from the art teacher.

“Well, this girl had emotional problems. She would get very upset over things no one else could see or understand. Kind of a handful. So on this day, she started having one of these episodes in my class. It is extremely disruptive. Every other kid in the room has to look because she’s so loud and potentially violent. I would guess it might even be the prudent thing to do, watch, because at least that would give you a little bit of a warning if she starts throwing scissors or something. I mean, it’s like that. It is potentially dangerous. But I want to model de-escalation and caring interactions for the other students so I start to try to calm her down. I got down next to her chair and started talking to her in a calm voice, and I put my hand on her forearm in what I would call a….a….loving touch. Not creepy loving, but it was like what a parent would do to their own kid under similar circumstances. I touched her arm. That sent her into an absolute apoplectic fit. I mean she flipped out. Started screaming and flailing. I had to ask the other kids to funnel out of the room and I called the principal for help.

He shows up and asks what set her off. I said I was trying to calm her down and I touched her arm. She was yelling “He touched me!” anyway, so I wasn’t about to hide that fact. Plus it was obvious that was the trigger. But I explained that she was already acting up before that.

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5 An Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is a “plan or program developed to ensure that a child who has a disability identified under the law and is attending an elementary or secondary educational institution receives specialized instruction and related services.” (The DO-IT Center, 2015)
After we got that all straightened out, he invites me to his office and he explains that her IEP indicates that she doesn’t like to be touched. I said that would have been good to know! Then he told me that since she had this info in her IEP, that I had violated the agreement, and was in the wrong. That was the day I decided to quit.”

He succinctly summarized what thought went through his mind that day.

“I don’t need this shit.”

This teacher was a working metal artist with salable skills that could be used in both practical and artistic ways. When he says he didn’t need that (job), he meant it. He said he could make at least as much as he did as a teacher while choosing his jobs and working as much as he wanted to. His wife had health benefits, so that wasn’t a major worry at the time. That was his last year of teaching.

The second of the men told an epically-long story of his alleged abuse incident. Part of the reason it was such a long tale was that the fallout took quite a long time to play out and involved many players, including the child, the child’s parents, the principal, the school’s lawyers, the teacher, the teachers’ union rep and the teachers’ union lawyer. I’m going to report on the effects of the events rather that include the whole story here.

The incident started when a student kept leaning back on the two hind legs of his chair. The teacher asked him to keep all four chair legs on the ground. The student tested his limits a few more times. The teacher told the student he was going to fall and to please keep his chair legs on the ground. Shortly after that, the kid tipped his chair back one more time, tipped over backwards and fell flat on his back onto the floor, and hit his head. The teacher went over, picked him up, asked if he was okay, checked for signs of concussion, didn’t see any, then he removed the boy’s chair and made him stand at his desk for the next half hour. After that was over, he gave the chair back and asked the student to keep the legs on the ground and the boy
complied. That night, the student told his parents that his teacher had made him stand at his desk with no chair “all day.” The parents came in and filed a complaint. The complaint “went up the flagpole.”

There were then months of hearings and trials in which the teacher felt attacked by his student’s family, his principal, and his school system. One day, he entered a hearing room and on one side of the room were eight people prepared to defeat him while the only person in his corner was his union-appointed lawyer.

Among things in his favor was that every kid in the class who was interviewed backed up his story. The end result of this event was that the teacher was absolved of all charges and the school was ordered to treat him as if nothing had happened. He was not able to return the favor. He knew the principal and the school system had ganged up on him based on the word of a troubled 8-year-old kid. For the rest of his career, he was extremely unsettled and worried about similar things happening. He was happy to report that the principal was reassigned while he maintained his classroom, but that didn’t remove his newfound paranoia. He described his mental state thusly, “after that, I was always watching my back.”

A third man’s story struck many of the same notes. He was accused of hitting a student. He also came out of his litigation process “winning” and innocent, but he too felt that he could no longer stay in the school. His words describing his mental state after his incident were that he was in “a heightened state of awareness. Always on my toes.” He also said “I never felt safe again.” I found that to be an interesting choice of words, because he was a big man in an elementary school. Where was the danger? I asked for elaboration. He said it wasn’t his physical safety he was worried about. It was his freedom. “I could easily imagine a similar incident
resulting in me going to prison for many years and being registered as a child predator for life.” I asked him why he didn’t think he could beat any claims if he was indeed innocent. He replied:

“I saw how easily things can stick. They didn’t stick to me that time but…imagine running across a field of arrows. They’re flying all over the place. You aren’t even looking. You’re just running through all these flying arrows. You hear ‘em whistling past you on all sides. But you make it to the other side without getting hit. If someone offered you one year’s salary, would you turn around and run back?

Oh, I forgot. You have a blindfold on.”

What we see in these three stories is that each man claimed to have been accused of something he did not do, or in the first case, something he did not know to be wrong, and then to have been abandoned by his school when he needed them to support him.

I asked all the men about claims of abuse and only these three told such stories. Yet for all three of them, this was the tipping point. It seems that if this sort of event happens, it has a profound effect on the person to whom it happened. To those for whom no claims of violence had been lodged, it was not an issue. It didn’t even seem to cross their minds, though they did enact steps to prevent it. None of the other five men spoke of feelings of being in a heightened state or always being on their toes or watching their backs. It was as if they lived in a different world. It reminded me of a story I remember reading after the 9/11 attack. Someone said something to the effect of “I don’t think I’ll ever feel as safe again as I did this morning, before the attack.” In a similar way, it wasn’t something anyone thought about until it happened, then it was all anyone could think about.

These three men all recognized that the school should not dismiss claims of abuse. If those claims are legitimate, circling the wagons around a guilty abuser is the worst thing that can happen. The children must be protected. They know this. They know there are no easy answers
and they understand why the schools acted the way they did, but in their opinions, that doesn’t make it right.

So how can the school assure that the innocent go free? We broached this topic in our interviews. No one offered a foolproof way of solving this problem. Would cameras in the classroom have been able to help prevent these suits or resolve them more quickly? Two teachers mentioned that as one thing that would have helped them.

“But then you have Big Brother, and you wanna talk about some parents freaking out? That’ll do it.”

The art teacher wasn’t so sure parents wouldn’t get on board.

“Cameras would help protect both parties, just like police body cams. I think parents would go for it if they thought it would mean more safety for their children. Who doesn’t want that? I wouldn’t have cared if they videotaped me. Why would you? They can already watch you at any time. The only difference is that you wouldn’t know. I don’t know. I bet teachers would howl more than parents. Kids don’t give a hoot. I guess when you’re innocent, you don’t really have a lot to hide.” Then he snorted “Still wouldn’t have helped me. I broke the IEP.”

The School Will Not Protect You

The thought that they all came away with was that the school wouldn’t protect them when claims were made against them.

“The school system will stab you in the back before you can say boo. You can bring in all the other kids as witnesses. No one saw anything because nothing happened. You may win the case but you’ll lose the war. Once you’re labeled, forget it. Parents will know before the year is out. No one will want to be in your class next year. Principals will be pressured to get rid of you. By then, you’ll probably want to leave anyway.

I know I did.”

The big man explained the school’s perspective.

“There’s always another teacher waiting. Granted, most of them are women, but there are enough applicants that we don’t need to keep
anyone. If a teacher creates a problem for the school, no matter how the problem started, or who started it, or whose fault it was, the easiest solution is to get rid of the teacher. Or make it such that the teacher wants to leave. There’s a perception that teachers can’t be fired because of unions, but that is nowhere near as secure as the public believes.

No looking back now. I wouldn’t go back again for all the money in the world.”

This theme seems like it would make more sense in the School System category, and I believe that is the right choice, but it only became an issue for these men after something outside the school system started a process. It wouldn’t have made sense to discuss it before getting into the threatening societal issues, but now that its meaning is clear, when discussing themes elsewhere, it will put it in the School System category.

Lack of Trust

Accusations and conflicts caused feelings of powerlessness and paranoia. Those feelings stem from a lack of trust.

“Obviously the ideal would be that they trust us. And that we are all worthy of trust. I don’t know how you could achieve that anymore, with all the mobility and cities. Trust is built over time by interactions in a community. In small towns, I think people grow to know who to trust. They’ve known each other for a long time and seen people handle lots of different conditions. I know in my hometown, I knew who I could trust. People don’t have long histories in communities anymore. Kids go to college somewhere else. Then when they graduate, they go somewhere other else. Then they move several times during their adult lives now. How is anyone going to truly be able to trust anyone like that?”

Good question. Maybe that’s a question for future research.

“We’re not a very trusting country. The guns are a result of that. The security cameras everywhere. The militarized police. Nobody trusts anybody. And...we see something happen every day that reinforces why we shouldn’t!”
This lack of trust between the teacher and the administration stood as the crux of the matter for these men. Without trust, there was no safety. Without safety, there was constant vigilance and worry on their parts. They could not put a value on that feeling. It was, essentially, infinitely valuable. There was no amount of money that would be worth voluntarily suffering through that feeling on a daily basis. They felt that it would be ridiculous to stay; that they would have to be masochists to choose that life. They weren’t.

**Action Steps**

As has been made apparent in this chapter, there are many different problems that affect teachers. Is there any way to make life better for them? One of the men has an idea.

“All this stuff is fixable. All it takes is political will. I haven’t seen a lot of that over the years. Eventually it occurred to me that I might be able to solve more of these problems by running for office than by teaching. I think that may be my next step. Local school board. See what happens from there.”

**Summary**

In this chapter, I elucidated themes arising from my collected data, and supported those themes with verbatim and condensed quotations from participant interviews. The development of these themes was guided by my theoretical framework and my method of narrative thematic analysis described in chapter three. In the next chapter, I discuss the findings of my analysis.
Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations

In this chapter, I very briefly summarize the method I used to conduct this study, then I discuss the findings of my analysis. This will be followed by proposals of related future research that became apparent during this process. Finally, I will finish with a reminder of the purpose of this study and a short conclusion describing my thoughts about how well I met that purpose.

I agree with Anderson who wrote that research should be conducted outside the laboratory and should include meanings that are real, not artificial (Anderson, 1983). To do that, this qualitative investigation used traditions of narrative inquiry and thematic analysis to explore, through unscripted stories and conversations, the thought-processes of male elementary teachers as they prepared to leave their jobs, and followed that thread to discover their thoughts on how to improve schools and society at large. The afore-mentioned methods were utilized to explore several questions, which guided and remained at the forefront of this research.

The three research questions I considered to be key were:

• What are the self-professed narratives used by former male elementary school teachers when describing the events and thought-processes leading up to the decision to leave the profession of teaching?

• Are there critical events within these narratives that serve as “the last straw” in pushing the men to leave the profession?

• Are there common themes that emerge from these narratives?

The themes that emerged from my analysis of the data as explained in Chapter Four are
summarized below. The conclusions stemming from these themes are discussed in turn. I have throughout this paper referred to these themes as frustrations and will continue to do so. I have written the economic themes in the first person to help bring them to life as thoughts that might go through one’s head when confronted with such problems.

Themes are broken down into three categories: The Economy, The School System, and Society. The themes all stem from one of these sources.
Table 1.

*Summary of Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source Category</th>
<th>Theme/Frustration</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Economy</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme #1</td>
<td>This Job is Not Worth the Suffering</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme #2</td>
<td>I Can’t Afford to Do this Job</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme #3</td>
<td>I’m Worth More than this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The School System</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme #1</td>
<td>Unexpected Favoritism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme #2</td>
<td>Schools Prioritize School Success Over Students’ Wellbeing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme #3</td>
<td>Testing Corrupts the System</td>
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<td>Theme #4</td>
<td>Character Education is not Important to Schools</td>
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<td>Theme #5</td>
<td>Schools Don’t Value Caring Teachers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme #6</td>
<td>Thwarted Expectations of Normalcy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme #7</td>
<td>Dwindling Autonomy</td>
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<td>Theme #8</td>
<td>Feelings of Entrapment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme #9</td>
<td>The School Will Not Protect You</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Society</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme #1</td>
<td>Bad Homelife of Students</td>
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<td>Theme #2</td>
<td>Single Mothers Need Help</td>
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<td>Theme #4</td>
<td>Lack of Respect from Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme #5</td>
<td>The Spectre of Impropriety</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Economy

Theme – This Job is Not Worth the Suffering

As these men see it, there is an amount of suffering that every teacher has to endure in his job. This amount admittedly varies from person to person and from school to school, but each person has a limit. When that limit is reached, teachers say to themselves “this job is not worth the suffering.” This theme is a discussion of the value of mental anguish. This theme should apply to all jobs in the United States. A simplistic view of work is that people decide to take jobs based on the transactional nature of trading time and labor for money. Jobs that require more skill or more time should pay rates commensurate with the scarcity of people with such skills or with willingness to do the work. This, of course, is not really how things work. There are other variables thrown into the mix that complicate the equation, like competition, affordability of healthcare coverage, ability to move to where the jobs are, and housing prices in the intended destination. Certifications are widely varying in return-on-investment rates. It costs a similar amount of money to get a degree in social work or theater as it does to get a degree in accounting or engineering, but the resulting jobs for which one is qualified based on that similarly-priced education pay significantly different salaries. Add personal preferences, like history in a community, desired proximity to family, and environmental preferences (e.g. mountains vs. beach), and things get a lot messier when trying to answer the simple question of whether a job is worth the money. The stories that brought this theme to life suggest that there are specific problems that produce inordinate imbalance in the equation. Those themes, at best, can scarcely
be overcome with more pay, and at worst, cannot. The four most impactful of these themes for
the men in this study were *I Can’t Afford to Do this Job; I’m Worth More than This* (rare but
there); *Dwindling Autonomy*; and most powerful of all if it became an issue, *The School Will Not
Protect You*. In the end, all eight men referenced one of these four themes as being instrumental
in their decisions to leave their jobs.

The rest of the themes referenced in this paper are frustrating, but not deal-breaking. They
can be overcome with sufficient pay.

**Theme – I Can’t Afford to Do this Job**

This theme centered on how the teachers’ salaries limited their abilities to live what they
considered to be a comfortable or desirable life. It has very little or nothing to do with the job
itself. Their cost-of-living expenses like commuting and mortgages or rent were so high that they
quickly determined that they couldn’t remain solvent with their teaching income. Of note with
this theme was that these men almost always positioned the struggles of economic reality of
teachers not as an issue of low pay, but rather that everything required to live a comfortable life
costs too much. The implication is that they think the pay is acceptable but that the cost of living
isn’t, in many places where they worked. Two out of the eight men explicitly stated that they
needed more money, while the other six all focused on how wealth inequality seemed to skew
the playing field in favor of the wealthy to such a degree that hard work and good planning was
not sufficient for success. In many cases, they acknowledged that paying teachers more would
solve their problem, and they thought that would be a great idea for a variety of reasons, but their
arguments and stories had recurring undercurrents that suggested that they were angrier and
more frustrated with structural unfairness in the economy affecting the majority of the population
than that they personally were not being paid enough.
The positioning of oneself in relation to money in this way does say something about the kind of men these are, but there is also evidence to back up their way of thinking. In many cities, things actually are too expensive for middle class people to live. This aligns with quite a few studies of housing prices and the economy (e.g. (Joseph, 2014)). Cities are increasingly becoming stratified into the wealthy, who own everything, and the poor, who receive housing subsidies. The middle class is being squeezed out of many, if not most, cities. Teacher salaries for the most part put them into the middle class; in some cases lower middle class. This means that teachers cannot afford to live where they work. It’s a real problem. This problem has nothing to do with being men, as it certainly affects all teachers as well as people in many other professions, but it may affect men more than women psychologically if they have a culturally-imposed self-image of a breadwinner and caretaker of the family. That self-image is wrecked by these economic conditions resulting in a man with such a self-image seeing himself as failing, contributing to the desire to change his circumstances.

**Theme – I’m Worth More Than This**

This theme is about teachers positioning themselves as competent, valuable members of society. It is said by someone who believes in himself and feels that his pay should reward him for his expertise and sacrifice of time and money to have become qualified. Demonstrating this theme, the teachers found that they had little control over how much they were being paid after having spent several years and many thousands of dollars preparing for this career. Schools simply do not offer high salaries to beginning teachers. No amount of negotiation will get a young teacher a sufficient salary to pay the bills in some districts. A lot of people in all kinds of jobs may think *I’m Worth More than This*, but something interesting about these men was that they could go get jobs in different fields that paid better than their teaching jobs. In essence, they
actually were worth more than that. If one were confident of one’s ability to change careers and get a pay raise, it probably wouldn’t be surprising for one to espouse an attitude of I’m Worth More than This. The reason they hadn’t done this sooner was that they truly wanted to be teachers. It wasn’t the high pay that drew them in, but it was the low pay that drove them out.

Discussion of All Three Economic Themes

It is true that the three economic themes can be boiled down to one idea: Teaching doesn’t pay enough. That’s a sufficient summary of the category if one is needed, but the nuances of how these men positioned themselves in relation to this idea reveal some opportunities to improve the conditions of similarly positioned people that do not rely exclusively on more pay. One such solution is the provision of subsidized housing. This has long been a staple of churches who provide free parsonages, convents, homes and apartments for their generally modestly-paid clergy. Some colleges offer subsidized homes for professors, (e.g. U.C. Irvine) when the local housing market puts all homes and apartments beyond the reach of anyone trying to live on the salary provided. Recently, some school districts in California have begun offering the same thing to K-12 teachers (Cohen, 2015). Just like college professorships, there are plenty of qualified candidates who want these school teaching jobs, and would like to live in these school districts, but they simply can’t afford to do the job. If this theme isn’t addressed, working on the other two themes won’t produce positive results. It doesn’t matter how pleasant the environment is or how well compensated someone feels if they can’t afford to live close enough to make it to work.

It doesn’t require more teacher pay to solve two of these three problems, but it most likely does involve increased costs for the schools. Finding the balance of these three themes may be a potential area of future research.
There could be larger societal changes that would change the cost of housing in cities, but they all seem unlikely to happen for many years to come. One such seemingly extreme but effective example that I am providing here simply to show that not all solutions must be school-driven is to let each American adult own only one home in the country. While we can agree that this is unlikely to happen, it would have a profound effect on housing prices. In some big cities, over 25% of the housing stock isn’t occupied for a majority of the time (Johnson D. C., 2015). Those mostly-empty homes serve as second homes and always-available apartments, as well as pure financial investment instruments for wealthy families who have no intention of ever visiting them. The point is that not all solutions to these three frustrations involve paying teachers more. Options exist to help almost everyone, with teachers benefitting along with the rest of the middle class. Will those options ever be explored? I’ll leave that question to economists and policy-makers.

The School System

The following themes all stem from within the school system. They are frustrations caused by school policies, state and federal mandates, and administrator priorities.

Theme - Unexpected favoritism.

Humility seems to be a common character trait of these male elementary school teachers. Men who feel entitled to things don’t seem to choose this career path. It doesn’t pay particularly well. It’s hard. It involves helping other people. That doesn’t call out to people who have a selfish, entitled approach to life. As a result, when these men received preferential treatment based on their gender, they were taken aback. They felt as if they were cheating or being handed unearned rewards (which they were). For whatever reason, their upbringing seemed to have
taught them that one should get ahead by hard work and good choices and receiving unearned benefits grated on them. They took them begrudgingly, because denying them bore potential pitfalls, but they wanted to keep a low profile if it had to happen. None of these men indicated that favoritism was a big player in their decision to quit, but several of them brought it up as a small annoyance that they believe to more often affect male teachers. They all knew that no one would cry over this qualm, but they thought people should know about it. As men who frequently talked of a desire for all people to be treated equally, it was interesting to hear them reveal that they would like to remove such benefits from themselves to put everyone on the same playing field. Despite the seeming throwaway nature of this frustration, it was one of the things to which they did not want their names attached. Whining about privilege is a sure way to inspire trolling attacks. It’s “like rich people claiming that they’re bored” said one of the men. “Everyone else is like ‘Oh, that’s so sad. I feel so sorry for you that good things happen for no reason. Poor guy.’” These guys didn’t see it that way.

**The Effects of a Testing Culture**

Four themes emerged that were based on the deleterious effects of a testing culture. Similar to the economic themes, these could be lumped together as one meta-theme, this time concerning how testing causes a misplacement of priorities within the school system. I am keeping them separate though because they bear important distinctions that help to provide insight into possible solutions that are harder to see without the specific frustrations being brought to the fore.

The testing to which these teachers refer is specifically state and federal testing upon which school funding hinges. Since schools’ ratings and funding allotments are partially decided by the results of each school’s aggregated student scores on these tests, the institution has great
incentive to get students to score as highly on the tests as possible. As a result, many priorities shift from ‘good for the student’ to ‘good for the school.’ Four of these priority shifts rose to the level of themes based on the stories of these men.

First is a theme I have labeled **Schools Prioritize School Success Over Students’ Wellbeing**. The men in this study suggest that schools are obsessed with testing now. Overall, the effects of this are far-reaching, influencing many things beyond the act of taking tests. The focus on testing robs students of other opportunities, like field trips, school plays, and even exploratory science. It may cut into physical education and music and art because those subjects are not tested. It restricts any kind of creativity or flexibility that teachers had within the curriculum because the things that will be on the test are the things that will be taught. Test scores are so important to a school’s survival, these men said, that nothing else matters. Everything is about testing. Too much time was spent teaching to the tests, preparing for the tests, and taking the tests.

The teachers in this study believed that the prioritizations that arose from the mandated testing requirements were bad for students. Being dedicated to working for the good of the students, these men were quite frustrated by the school’s priorities.

In all four themes, testing was considered to be the most important priority. None of these teachers thought that was right. Going back to the idea of lumping these four frustrations into a meta-theme, these teachers might have agreed with the statement **Testing is Ruining Everything**.

These men think that schools should reshuffle their priorities to place the welfare and education of the children at the top of the priority list, but that would require the state and federal
governments to reshuffle their priorities too because these schools are trying to do what they are told by higher authorities.

**Theme - Testing Corrupts the System**

Testing leads to cheating by administrators. It should scarcely need to be said that cheating isn’t allowed in schools any more by the administrators than it is by the students but some of these teachers argued that testing is so high stakes that it leads to unethical behaviors on the part of administrators. They found it to be the height of hypocrisy that students were verbally flogged with threats against cheating on anything ever, yet the people who laid down the law were the very ones who later broke it.

The reason schools are obsessed with testing is because that’s how funding levels are determined. There’s money on the line. As we saw in chapter four, when money is on the line, cheating is inevitable.

The men in this study consider themselves to be ethical, upstanding men. This is the first reason that they don’t think cheating is right. Second, they don’t care nearly as much about the school’s aggregated test scores as the administrators. Test scores don’t teach kids. These men do. They want schools to get their priorities straight.

**Theme - Character Education is not Important to Schools**

The gist of this frustration is that schools prioritize content over character because content is what is tested, while the men think that character is more important. One point that I think is worth making here is that character development has long been a goal of the American educational system, yet recently it seems to be getting short shrift because of the over-prioritization of testing.
Theme - Schools Don’t Value Caring Teachers

These men saw themselves as caring teachers. They wanted to demonstrate their care by listening to students and having meaningful interactions with them but generally found that caring about their students as people was not important to their administrators. Caring doesn’t get them higher test scores. Learning the content that will be on the tests does. Schools made a show of saying that good character was appreciated, but there was never any time or motivation to teach it.

Theme - Thwarted Expectations of Normalcy

This theme is about the frustration teachers felt when people treated them in ways that seemed different from the ways they expected to be treated. Some of the micro-aggressions and/or micro-oppressions they perceived as abnormal involved prejudice of masculinity and suspicions of a violent nature. They compared it to being an oppressed minority or someone with PTSD.

Prior to being teachers, seven of these eight men had not experienced a culture of oppression. They grew up as white men in a white male dominated culture and experienced the benefits of white privilege. To these men, the prejudicial behaviors they encountered seemed strange and unwarranted. The black man in my group of participants didn’t mention feeling this way. It may not have seemed like anything new was happening to him. He was used to it.

This theme wasn’t one of the powerful ones. It was more of a constant gnawing away. Of the SDT feelings, the most relevant seems to be the relatedness feeling. The intangible prejudice some of these men felt separated them from the students’ parents and made them feel unwelcome. I found it interesting to recall how Willard Waller, in 1932, wrote about how
teachers are “psychologically isolated from the community” (Waller, 1932). Sounds like some things haven’t changed that much.

**Theme - Dwindling Autonomy**

This theme is about how these teachers perceived over time to be losing the ability to teach in ways that they thought was best. They thought their level of control was actually changing, not just their perception of control. The pressure of testing caused this too, but the source of the frustration was the loss of control. They were losing the ability to teach both what and how they wanted. As SDT tells us, autonomy is important, especially to men. Taking it away after it has been experienced is even worse. These men had tasted the sweetness of autonomy and had it pulled away. The longer-tenured teachers in my group seemed to be the most impacted by this change, probably because they had been teaching before the shift to a testing culture had occurred.

**Theme - Feelings of Entrapment**

In short, school is like jail. Several of the men in my study reported this observation. For the most part, though, they noticed it after they left their teaching jobs. They had dull feelings of discomfort and entrapment, but when they started new jobs, they reflected on what they had been feeling and realized they were justifying a lot of confining and controlling conditions so that they could make it through the day. They were physically confined, and cognitively preoccupied by the demands of the job. They found it to be exhausting, even before adding in the empathetic pain they experienced as a result of wanting to help their students. Several of them mentioned the metaphor of “drinking from a firehose” when I asked what their days were like. That is normally a metaphor that means that a lot of stuff is coming at someone faster than he can handle or process, but I find it to be an interesting choice because getting hit with the spray of a firehose is
also a means of control that police and prisons use on disobedient crowds and during riots. These teachers subconsciously chose to use a metaphor for their time teaching, especially at the beginning of their careers, as being the victim of a form of crowd control.

**Theme - The School Will Not Protect You**

This was a large frustration; one of the four instrumental frustrations found in this study. When the going got tough, their employer piled on. Even though these teachers didn’t do anything wrong, they were not only abandoned, but attacked by their school system. This was the most shocking and painful realization that any of my participants discussed. It did not apply to everyone, but when it did apply, it was the most important factor in their decision to leave. They described it as being like having a good friend completely betray you. Like having an unreliable stranger say you did something bad, and having your friend believe them instead of you. It’s a total break of the trusting relationship.

**The Dog in the Nighttime**

In the Sherlock Holmes story *The Adventure of Silver Blaze* (Doyle, 1981), Sir Arthur Conan Doyle writes about how his intrepid investigative protagonist Sherlock Holmes deduced something important about a case by noticing a clue that wasn’t there. In this case, a race horse was stolen from its stable, but this stable was guarded by a noisy and vigilant watchdog. The scene plays out like this:

Gregory (a Scotland Yard detective): “Is there any other point to which you would wish to draw my attention?”

Holmes: “To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time.”

Gregory: “The dog did nothing in the night-time.”

Holmes: “That was the curious incident.”
The dog had always barked at passersby and intruders before. Why had it not barked this time? Sometimes the most interesting and important clues can be things that aren’t there when we expect them to be. For me, this was the boy problem.

Not a single man in this group expressed any observations of boys suffering in the classroom, of boys not getting what they needed, or of boys being treated differently in the schools. Neither unsolicited nor with prodding did they have anything to offer that would lend any weight to the constellation of issues collectively called the boy problem. It’s possible that as men, they taught in ways that boys found engaging and thus didn’t suffer from the negative repercussions of boys being disengaged in their classrooms. It’s also possible that they weren’t looking for such problems and missed the clues that were there. They certainly saw boys that didn’t always enjoy school, but they never indicated that they thought boys as a group were suffering any conditions particular to their sex.

One teacher told of a year-long project in which students “adopted” a professional football team, and had to write about the city in which the team existed, collect statistics of players, and study the team’s mascot. They wrote to the mayors of each city and asked questions about the teams and some of them got personal responses from the mayors with signed photos of players and pictures of the stadiums and cities. Every student had a portfolio of output from this project that included math, writing, science, and art. They proudly displayed their projects in the hallways as the end of the year approached. This teacher thought this sort of project appealed to all the students and gave them all opportunities to use academic skills in practical ways to achieve goals. They persuaded, researched, drew, calculated, and documented. In his opinion, projects like this made it less likely that his boys would become disengaged and think this education stuff wasn’t for them. He was quick to add that the girls liked this project too. “It
wasn’t because it was about sports that boys liked it”, he said. “It was because it was real.”

“When you write a letter to a mayor, it has to be legible and make sense. That applies to boys and girls.” He wasn’t of the opinion that instruction had to be differentiated by gender. It just had to be good. None of these men designed curricula specifically to address the possibility of disengaged boys.

One man, without prompting, brought up author Ralph Fletcher who wrote Boy Writers (Fletcher, 2006), having read some of his work in college. That book highlights how boys are often not well-considered when English teachers and elementary teachers design writing assignments. This teacher said he understood the reported pitfalls and sought to avoid them in his lessons, but “that wasn’t so much creating good boy projects as it was getting rid of stupid crap that nobody liked.” It seemed, after talking to these men, that this wasn’t a problem they experienced, witnessed, or considered to be noteworthy.

The one recurring story I was able to extract that had to do with boys and girls having different experiences in school was that several of the men said that their principals often gave them boys who were considered to be problems. The principals thought some of these boys needed a stricter male influence in their lives. One teacher, who talked about this the most, said he didn’t mind this despite not considering himself to be stricter than his female coworkers, but he did find it annoying that his rambunctious class loaded with kids “who needed a father figure” had to live up to the same testing standards as the other classes. He suggested that this was “not exactly fair” (to him). Even with these pressures, he wouldn’t commit to saying that boys had it any worse than girls in school, nor that he minded having all these boys in his class. His implication was more-so about him having it worse than his female colleagues in this regard. He was very gracious in this implication, saying he didn’t blame them nor envy them. He just didn’t
think his class should have been held to the same testing standards, especially when he thought about his pay raises being on the line, based on the test scores of the kids in his classroom.

This suggests that there are more troubled boys in these schools than troubled girls, and that is certainly backed up by a lot of evidence, at least when using the schools’ definitions of “troubled.” That is more the gist of the boy problem as it is explained in the literature. Despite that being the case, these men didn’t notice that much. What they noticed more often was how they were being treated differently than the female teachers.

**Society**

Themes in this category stem from outside the school but reach into the school. These frustrations have to do with what goes on at the students’ homes, how the government deals with different conditions in society like poverty, and how the media and politicians treat and portray teachers and schools among other things.

**Theme – Bad Home-life of Students**

This is the most painful of the themes. Witnessing the results of a bad homelife can be emotionally draining. These men saw too many good kids in bad situations with little hope of escape. They felt helpless. There is very little that a teacher can do. These teachers felt like they could be amazingly good for these kids, but only in school, and only for a year. The kids need amazing people in their lives all the time. These guys wish they could fill that need but the problem is too big. Each man can only really help a few kids per year, and even that is a tall order. If they don’t, they feel like they are wasting their superpowers. It kills them inside. This leads to one of the key observations of this study which was that students are almost never the root problem in elementary schools. They haven’t had enough time to be fully corrupted. If the kids are bad at this age, these men said, it is their homelife that’s causing that. If we could make
their lives at home better, we would make their education better, their futures better, their relationships better, and their chances of leading productive, enjoyable lives better. These men wished they could help more. That says something about the kinds of men these were.

**Theme - Single Mothers Need Help**

This theme is about these men seeing a lot of pain and suffering in the home because there were too many single mothers. The previous theme was about the kids. This one is about the parents. Most of the parents who suffer are women. Single dads don’t have it easy either but they are a tiny percentage of the single poor with children. This makes it hard for women to take care of their kids (not enough time and/or money) and makes the kids crave a man’s attention and love. The teachers had to become father figures. This theme could just as easily be called Missing Fathers, but since they weren’t there, the single mothers bear the brunt. It isn’t the women that cause the problems, it’s the circumstances.

**Theme - Unwanted Advances**

This theme is about single moms (or married moms for that matter) hitting on teachers. Some single men might find this to be a good problem to have, but these teachers did not appreciate it. It made things uncomfortable. It felt unethical. Most of these men were married. This was another theme that came up when we were discussing how these men’s experiences may have been different from their female colleagues. They said female teachers tend to meet divorced dads with kids. Male teachers tend to attract poor single women. That’s different.

**Theme - Lack of Respect in Society**

This one is about society not respecting the profession of teaching. It is an age-old problem, but seems to be exacerbated now by conservative politicians who denigrate teachers year-round. This is bad for the teachers’ egos and bad for their social status. It also makes it hard
to justify getting paid enough to make ends meet. Unions are also being attacked, generally by the same politicians. Conservatives don’t like unions or teachers. In most states, teachers are in unions, so teachers are hit twice. The public seems to buy the argument, even though people always say how much they value education. It is easier to see how a society values education by looking at how it is funded than by listening to what the people and the leaders say. None of the teachers claimed this theme was a big factor in their decision to quit, but they all mentioned how it was a constant annoyance and a figurative slap in the face for their efforts to serve what they believed to be the public good.

**Theme - The Spectre of Impropriety**

The threat of being accused of any kind of abuse causes all sorts of behavioral changes that are not in anyone’s best interest except the teachers in their efforts to avoid accusations. If this hadn’t been a worry, they would have all acted differently and, in their opinions, that would have been better for the kids. These men thought that showing affection to students would be healthy and productive but they universally denied such affection for fears of allegations of abuse based on perceptions of impropriety. The spectre of impropriety also hurts the teachers, who knowingly deny appropriately compassionate responses to student needs because they fear the repercussions of doing so. After having heard them talk, I liken it to a superhero who knows he can solve a problem with his powers voluntarily choosing to watch horrible things happen while doing nothing because the people have decided that they don’t want mutants with superpowers solving their problems for them. Meanwhile, no one else is solving the problems. The heroes, or in this case the teachers, find this dispiriting and depressing.

**Theme - Unfounded Allegations of Abuse**

This theme goes to the next stage; actual allegations. Even with great care to avoid them
and spotless records, allegations will still be made. At this point it’s no longer a fear. It is a reality. When accusations happen, big changes may be in the offing.

One thing I consider to be a key finding here is that based on this group of men, people were much more likely to make claims of violence against male teachers than they were to make claims of pedophilia at this time. Not one of these guys had any pedophilia incidents in his whole career, which was surprising based on the literature. Three of them had claims of violence lodged against them, resulting in cases being brought up before their internal conduct standards boards. All three teachers won their cases, but ended up either losing or quitting their jobs afterwards. They were not fired, because that wouldn’t have been technically possible, but they were encouraged to leave. After the first of such incidents for each man, they felt threatened all the time, as if they were being watched, waiting to figuratively get stabbed in the back. When the school ended up on the side of the student, and the only party supporting the teacher was the teachers’ union, the teacher did not feel like a valued member of the school team. Even after they won their cases, they didn’t want to be part of a team that fought for their dismissal. In their readings of the situation, it seemed as if the school felt like there was a better than 50/50 shot that they might be a child abuser. Since they do not see themselves as child abusers, this was an affront to their identities. These kinds of attacks are a rejection of the relatedness and competence aspects of self-determination theory. They indicated to the men that they were not valued team members and that they clearly didn’t know what they were doing. Add in the dwindling autonomy issue from above, and that’s a hat trick. That’s a recipe for departure.

Theme - Lack of Trust from Society

This theme starts with how trust is difficult to develop in the modern age and stretches to encompass teachers not being trusted. That in and of itself isn’t a huge problem for these men.
It’s the fallout of that. When no one can trust anyone, every claim of abuse becomes a bomb. Some parents don’t trust teachers. Some administrators don’t trust teachers. Some teachers don’t trust administrators to protect them when they need protection. This leads to feelings of paranoia and hyper-vigilance on the part of the teacher. Strangely, the students are usually the ones who trust the teachers the most. That is also, in a cruel twist, one of the reasons adults don’t trust them. Having kids trust the teachers puts the teachers in a very dangerous place. This theme describes another gnawing feeling that slowly chips away at teachers’ happiness and wellbeing. One teacher explained how he thought individualized education managed by computers would eventually solve this problem. The other solution proposed by some of the men was to use cameras in classrooms to protect both parties and reduce the reliance of trust as the currency of safety.

**General Discussion**

From a Self-Determination Theory perspective, it appears that the four instrumental themes most pointedly aim at wresting control from the teachers. For example, with *I Can’t Afford to Do this Job*, these men could not control the housing markets where they worked. That put them at the mercy of others in a losing game. They did not like that. Nothing they did could fix that problem. Some of them tried. None succeeded.

*Dwindling Autonomy* directly assaults one of the core tenets of SDT; that of autonomy. As schools gradually whittle away at teachers’ ability to teach what they think is best and control the ways in which they teach the rest, men in particular seem likely to take umbrage at that. Women have a long history of accepting work conditions that men will not. They do not deserve those conditions, but for whatever reason they are able to handle them. Men who have options, when presented with autonomy-limiting conditions, will exercise them. Options are not universally
available for people who don’t like their jobs. The fact that these men had them played a very large part in their willingness to quit.

Finally, The School Will Not Protect You is a theme that only became apparent when protection was needed by the men. My interpretation of these men’s responses to encountering this theme is that it was a personal affront to their membership in the school community, and in fact the larger community to be “thrown to the wolves” by their employer when they needed help, then to have the employer bring a few extra wolves to the party to join in the attack. In all cases, they would have been able to keep teaching because they had not broken any laws nor caused any harm, but they were so appalled at the abject abandonment of them by the school districts that they never wanted to be part of that group of people again. This is a clear example of the SDT principle of relatedness (or belongingness, as I prefer) being violated. What it looks like when someone isn’t being valued in a group, according to SDT, is to be ignored, forgotten, or rejected. These men felt those feelings strongly and rather than try to work their way back into the group, they walked away.

**Theoretical Framework Limitation**

I’d like to explain one observation I made while conducting this project. As I coded and categorized the stories of these men, it became clear to me that part of my theoretical framework, the future-looking part, was not offering much help. These teachers’ visions of the future were not important to the Universe. From the beginning, all of these men wanted to be teachers. Most of them went to college hoping to become teachers. They wanted to eventually become expert teachers and, in one case, a school system administrator. That’s how they saw their future selves. Then reality hit. The rug was yanked out from beneath them. They each had the realization that they were not in control. They were not the authors of their own destiny, Bakhtin be damned.
This realization was so encompassing that, in many cases, they no longer plan for the future with much expectation.

The processes that led to their departures didn’t just wreck their visions of their future, it changed the way they think about the future. They believe that making multi-year plans is an act of fantastical speculation. Not one of them laid out a clear path they were confident would play out as they expected. After they quit teaching, they all spoke of their future using some variation of the idea of “going with the flow.” These included things like “going where the wind takes me,” “we’ll see what happens,” and “I don’t really know what’s next.”

None of this should be taken to mean that these men are unhappy. They were a generally pleasant bunch to be with, fun to talk to, full of good stories. Most of them maintain long-term, successful marriages and all of the married men reportedly have well-adjusted children whose company they enjoy. They do think about the future and make plans, they just don’t expect them to work out. They are happy if they do. It’s not that they expect them to fail. They just don’t expect much at all. They may plan in those parts of their lives that they believe they can control, but career planning is simply not in that category anymore and appears unlikely to reenter it for quite some time. They do not view this as a problem. It is simply a reflection of their take on the nature of reality. Essentially, they have come to the conclusion that making plans for things that cannot be controlled is folly. One of them quoted the old maxim, “If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans.”

This idea of not being in control isn’t a theme because it wasn’t part of their reason for quitting. It arose as a result of one or all of the other frustrations that actually were themes. I classify it as more of a lesson learned than a frustration.
Reminder of Purpose

The intended goal of this study was to provide useful information to teachers, pre-service teachers, and people thinking of becoming teachers, as well as school administrators and reformers who want to improve the quality of schools and/or increase retention and recruitment of male teachers.

It is often the case when academics and school administrators try to develop plans for reforming and/or improving schools that the people consulted in those efforts are the ones who remain in them. Teachers who have quit are generally excluded from the conversation. Men who have quit are even less likely to be heard because they make up a small minority of such teachers.

I believe it is important to listen to individuals who were at one time in the thick of the educational system and made the decision to leave as they can provide valuable insights into some of the problems that exist there. Teachers who stayed inherently were not pushed beyond the breaking point. They may not know all the bad things that can happen. It’s possible that they have experienced them and simply have a higher breaking point, but they may not have experienced them at all. We will only know if we ask. I think that scholars, educational reformers, working teachers and pre-service teachers will find this approach to educational research useful, as it adds to the already rich data on teacher experience by providing deep and rich perspectives of experienced individuals who reached the ends of their ropes, as it were.

As I explained in chapter three, this study did not attempt to describe the thought-processes of all male elementary teachers’ who quit, nor did it indicate that some experiences and proposed solutions were more important than others. Rather, this study intended to discover the thought processes of this group of teachers as they were making the decision to quit and the
frustrations that contributed to that decision at this particular time in history, in the Northeastern and Mid-Atlantic regions of the U.S., where they all worked. I do not assume that these findings are true of all former male elementary teachers in all parts of the United States or elsewhere. That is not to say that the findings of this study cannot inform the preparation of future teachers, the management of working teachers, or the reformation of educational systems, social support systems, and/or social safety net services in the Northeast or in other parts of the country. It is assumed that readers of this research are capable of drawing their own conclusions about the transferability of the research.

These former teachers indicated that no researchers or school administrators, prior to these interviews, had ever asked them about their experiences with teaching since they left the profession. They were generally eager to talk about their experiences and ideas, and thought a wider audience should be made aware of some of the problems. Several of them thought that was an important goal for this study. Their thoughts for repairing the school system and the fabric of society were shaped by their years of experiences inside the school systems in which they taught, situated more broadly within American society in the early 21st century.

**Future Research**

Male elementary teachers are a small percentage of the teaching force. Those among them who quit teaching make up an even smaller group. This study was about the thoughts and experiences of a tiny subset of that kind of person, but there are many other people whose thoughts and experiences are also important if we are interested in understanding problems facing schools and the people within them. Most important to me, after having conducted this study, is to ask the same questions of women elementary school teachers who decided to quit teaching.
Just as these men told of experiences they had that they believed to be different from their female counterparts, it is almost inevitable that female teachers would reveal interesting insights concerning things that happen to them and thoughts that go through their minds as they approach the decision to quit teaching that differ from men. I would like to collect and explore these thoughts and experiences.

Large teacher surveys that cover tens or hundreds of thousands of teachers are good at exposing general ideas about what teachers find unsatisfactory about their jobs, but surveys do not always reveal the real culprits that underlie the answers teachers provide on such surveys. This study was an attempt to dig deeper into what really tips the scales when it comes to making the fateful decision to leave a career behind. Similar studies could be undertaken that seek to understand teachers who are happy in their jobs, who have been doing them for many years, and who have worked under different styles of leadership. Are they handling or approaching the same situations differently from these men or do they experiencing different things?

It may also be worth investigating whether the rates for male and female attrition changed following the rise in the perceived importance of testing and accountability, as these men seemed particularly irked by the associated loss of control and diminution of teaching what they believed to be important but untested skills and subjects.

A more challenging but likely entertaining study I would like to see is one in which students who have had both male and female teachers in elementary school are questioned before they go to middle school. Even if children have been asked before, the times continue to change and culture moves quickly. What do children think of teachers of each gender now? What makes them think a teacher is good? Do they think it makes sense to have teachers of both sexes?
It may be interesting to see comparative attrition rates of male and female teachers in countries with higher respect for teachers that the U.S., assuming there is some measure or proxy for teacher respect that can be used for the ranking of such countries.

The men in this study raised some interesting points about problems in our society that affected them as teachers. Are they right about what they claim to be the case? Are any of their proposed solutions being implemented anywhere and to what degree of success are those solutions achieving? Are certain social problems as intractable as these men think they are? Is there any way to more effectively help good kids in bad situations? Are there ways to end the cycles of violence and poverty? Is trust becoming harder to develop in our increasingly mobile and urban world? Those studies are beyond my capabilities, but I would appreciate efforts to pursue answers to such challenging questions.

**Conclusion**

Themes that emerged from the data showed that there exist certain under-explored problems in the educational system, and that one set of victims of these problems is male elementary teachers. The themes that emerged from this study show a complex web of factors negatively affecting these teachers, ranging from violations of self-conception to society-wide issues whose tentacles reach into the classroom and color the teachers’ experiences. In some neighborhoods in this country, it clearly takes a special kind of teacher to effectively teach and it is possible that this kind of teacher is often driven from the classroom by forces unrelated to the students. Large groups of young children can be a handful, but these teachers reported that students are not the root problem in elementary schools. At that age, children haven’t given up hope yet. They are still inquisitive and seek love and approval. They want to learn and play. No, indeed the overarching cause of these men’s departures was that the value proposition of
teaching was not sufficiently good. Things that lowered the value of teaching included systemic pressures on the teachers such as federal and state mandates that generated unacceptable behaviors by school administrators; complaints by parents that were then believed by administration without investigation; and the far-reaching effects of the depressing economic and social reality that confronts a large percentage of our nation’s population every day, including its children, who are not responsible for the world into which they were born.

These insights provide an interesting new perspective on the problem of retaining male elementary teachers, and probably other teachers as well. Of particular note was that support for teaching autonomy and support when threatened are crucial to these men feeling valued. They want to know that their skills and talents are appreciated and respected, and to be allowed to do their jobs without constant oversight and interference, and that someone “has their back” when the chips are down. Without those supports, an acceptable value proposition for teaching is difficult to achieve, even with high pay. On the flipside, some school districts’ costs of living are so expensive that almost no seemingly reasonable amount of money is sufficient to attract and retain teachers, even if all other frustrations are eliminated. The problems presented in this dissertation obviously require attention at multiple levels; changes in school district, state, and federal policies would all need to happen if policy makers and school administrators truly wished to see these problems resolved.

If we as a society desire to have male teachers in our elementary schools, it is worth considering how to attend to these needs without sacrificing the safety and education of our students.
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Education

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Work Experience

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2005-2006  Course Instructor – History of Popular Music, Penn State

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1997-2001  Production Coordinator – Center for the Performing Arts, Penn State

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Awards

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