

THE EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES OF MALE ELEMENTARY
SCHOOL COUNSELORS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand and describe the experiences and perspectives of male school counselors at the elementary level. School counseling in elementary schools can help provide students with valuable resources and support. At this level, children undergo many physical and emotional developmental changes. Support systems at the elementary level can encourage and promote students' social and emotional well-being. The lack of male school counselors who can support students without a male presence in their life is an important issue. Male elementary school counselors make up a very small percentage of the total counselor population. This study identified expectations, benefits, challenges, stigmas, barriers, and recruitment and retention needs through information gained from the lived experiences of existing male elementary school counselors. Future steps and recommendations from this phenomenological study have been included to help increase the number of male school counselors working at the elementary level. The framework that guided this study was Gottfredson's theory of circumscription and compromise, it explained the impact between modeling and self-concept formation of occupational perspectives or aspirations gained during this developmental stage. Additionally, Bandura's self-efficacy theory in relation to careers also help guide this study. The theory demonstrates the importance that modeling can have on an observer's personal self-efficacy, interests, and confidence in their ability to choose or perform a particular occupation. Data was be collected and transcribed using Otter.ai. Interpretations of the data from participants was used to generate several themes, which were analyzed and used to assist in understanding the role of male elementary counselors.

Keywords: phenomenological, support systems, expectations, benefits, emotional development

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Dedication

First and foremost, I must thank my God and Savior for holding my hand during this journey. He has never left me throughout this process and has provided me the strength to see it through to fruition. I am nothing without my Lord and with Him I am everything that I strive to become. Thank you, Father, for loving and helping me achieve this life-long goal.

My family has been unwavering in their support of this endeavor. To my husband, Don, you have supported me in so many ways. Thank you for allowing me the time I needed to pursue this lifelong goal and dream. During these past years, you have had to wear many hats and fill many roles. You have been unwavering in your encouragement and for that I thank you and will always love you. To my awesome children, thank you for love, encouragement, and understanding. I hope that you know how much I love you all, and that I have inspired you to reach for the stars and to dream big because you can achieve anything you want in life. Mama, you have been my greatest cheerleader, encourager and source of inspiration. Thank you for being such a great example. Daddy, your uplifting words throughout this process have also meant more than you could ever know. You always reminded me to keep my eye on the prize and that my efforts would pay off. Finally, Dr. Baker you have been with me throughout this endeavor. I thank God that He gave me someone who challenged, supported, and encouraged me throughout this process. Your insight and help have made this life goal a reality. Thank you.

Acknowledgments

“Dulcius Ex Asperis”

-Author unknown

This motto translates to “Sweeter after Difficulties,” originated from the Ferguson family crest; a Scottish clan traced back to the sixth century. The motto has become my personal philosophy related to the dissertation process and other important events in my life. I was told many times during this process that it was a "marathon, not a sprint," and this statement is completely true. This journey has been long and winding, with many twists and turns along the way. However, the unwavering support that I have received from so many special people has been transformative in allowing me to achieve this milestone in my life. It really is sweeter.....

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List of Abbreviations

American School Counselor Association (ASCA)

Male Elementary School Counselor (MESC)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand and describe the perspectives of male school counselors at the elementary level. The impact of school counseling on a student's life can be significant because students frequently turn to it for advice and teaching regarding social and academic issues that they may run into daily. Teachers play this function, but school counselors have the skills and education to support student's academic and social-emotional needs. Much of the work that school counselors do occurs behind the scenes. However, the self-discovery and achievements attained through this work make a positive difference in the lives and hearts of the children they serve by helping them realize their full potential (O'Connor, 2018).

Today's school counselors play a vital role in helping students succeed in all life pursuits (Scott, 2018). Most school counselors are female, especially at the elementary level. Since the 1960s, few male counselors have entered the profession, and substantially fewer at the primary levels (Michel et al., 2015). The goal of this research was to explore the experiences of existing male elementary school counselors (MESCs) and their perspectives as to what they believe contributes to the lack of MESCs at the primary level. In addition, the term male educators will also encompass male school counselors. The problem addressed in this research was to identify reasons that MESCs believe contribute to the small number of males as elementary school counselors. Furthermore, research and findings from this study were used to fill the gap regarding the lack of research concerning this population.

The research evaluated the lived experiences of the MESC study participants as well as their perceptions of their careers. Chapter one addressed these goals and problems by exploring background information concerning this topic, identifying the problem, purpose and key terms

relating to this study, and explaining the significance of this study by stating the research question that guided this phenomenological research.

Background

With 75% of all elementary school counselors being female, such disproportionality supported further study of this topic (Elementary School Counselor, 2021). While a great deal of research exists on male elementary teachers, the reasons why so few males enter the school counseling field as elementary counselors was researched to understand this population further. The few studies of the previous 10 to 15 years on this topic failed to address certain questions relevant to the shared experiences of today's MESC's and their perceptions of their careers (Dodson & Di Borders, 2006; Edwards, 2013; Schmitt, 2015). This study identified and explained emerging themes that will contribute to further research and investigation of this phenomenon.

Gottfredson's theory of circumscription and compromise was utilized to evaluate the results of this study. Of particular interest was Gottfredson's theory regarding the development of perceived appropriate occupational perspectives based on a child's developmental stage during their early years (Gottfredson, 1981; Gottfredson & Lapan, 1997; Ivers et al., 2012). This study also utilized Bandura's theory of self-efficacy to examine how important modeling can be when shaping and molding one's preference and interest in such careers as nontraditional jobs, such as male elementary school counseling (Bandura, 1986, 1997, & 2000). Gottfredson and Bandura's theories helped validate the importance of early exposure to careers including nontraditional ones for elementary students. This study supported the theoretical views of Gottfredson and Bandura through the experiences and perceptions shared by participating MESC's.

Situation to Self

I can think of numerous instances where having a MESC in an elementary context would be advantageous as a school counselor and licensed clinical mental health counselor. Many students lack strong male role models in their lives. As a result, MESC's can offer an alternative viewpoint on various topics that occur among students. For elementary students to fully benefit from a comprehensive and inclusive counseling program, they need one that best serves their needs. I conducted this qualitative phenomenological study with this dedication to the students I serve and love for the career I have chosen.

This study used a constructionist paradigm since the experiences of the participants were examined for the population being studied. A constructionist paradigm was also selected due to the use of a qualitative research approach for the topic investigated by studying the experiences of others (Adom et al., 2016). According to the "constructionist philosophical paradigm, as an approach that asserts that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences" (Adom et al., 2016, p. 2). This approach allows the individual experiencing the occurrence to gather their knowledge and understanding of the subject being experienced. This approach also applies to the MESC's in this study since they are experiencing this occurrence firsthand and can develop and form their own perspectives regarding their lived experiences as MESC's.

Problem Statement

Many issues found in recruiting male elementary teachers are also present for MESC's and very little research exists on MESC's; most studies have concentrated on the low number of male elementary school teachers. Two studies that examined MESC's cited the low representation of males at the primary and elementary levels (Edwards, 2013; Schmitt, 2015). The problem is the lack of MESC's in the schools and the challenges that cause this phenomenon. There is an

identifiable gap in the literature when examining the reasons for such a low percentage of MESC's and existing MESC's perceptions of why this situation exists. The goal of this research was to explore the experiences of male elementary school counselors (MESC's) and their perspective as to what they believe contribute to the lack of MESC's at the primary level.

This qualitative phenomenological study examined the lived perspectives of MESC's in southeastern North Carolina school districts and identified themes that contribute to challenges in recruiting males to the elementary school counseling profession. MESC's was the population studied during this phenomenological research. Interviews were utilized to explore the lived experiences and perspectives of MESC's and to provide insight into existing perceived challenges for males entering this profession. In addition, data gathered from this qualitative phenomenological study was used to identify strategies and practices that university counseling programs and school districts can consider when planning, designing, and developing recruiting strategies. Findings may lead to encouraging an increase the number of males who enter the elementary level as school counselors.

Today's school counselors play a vital role in careers and developing and educating the whole child by providing social, emotional, and academic support (Scott, 2018). The work they do behind the scenes and directly for the students allows students to be themselves and obtain the academic achievements necessary to be successful in life and the lives of others (O'Connor, 2018). The data collected in this qualitative research provided the opportunity to observe and gather the lived experiences of current MESC's to formulate the significant themes that contributed to the topic being evaluated. This problem needed to be studied further to learn from current MESC's how to recruit and support them at the elementary level. Examining the actual lived experiences of these counselors was important in solving the issues concerning the lack of male elementary school counselors. The findings and outcomes of this study will help to increase

the recruitment and help to support the retention of males in the elementary school counseling field.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore and describe the perceptions and experiences of MESCs from school districts located in southeastern North Carolina to gain a phenomenological perspective of their experiences and perceived challenges as existing MESCs. Qualitative research highlights the insights and perspectives of the research study's participants (Denny & Weckesser, 2019). Interviews of MESCs were utilized to collect interview data and make evaluations based on the findings. This study examined the perspectives and experiences from interviews with MESCs and identified existing themes that emerged and helped to explain the reasons why so few male school counselors enter the field at the elementary level.

Approximately 25% of all elementary school counselors are males, and this population was worthy of further study to understand this population's disproportionality (Elementary School Counselor, 2021). Gottfredson's theory of circumscription and compromise and Bandura's self-efficacy theory provide a sound theoretical foundation to approach this phenomenological study. The development of career knowledge and development starts in childhood (Marre, 2018). The importance of modeling in both theories is examined as it relates to the formation of interest and self-concept and the development of occupational perspectives during the elementary years (Gottfredson, 1981; Gottfredson & Lapan, 1997; Ivers et al., 2012). Finally, Hartung (2015) noted "childhood as the launching point of an enduring process of vocational development characterized by stages and associated developmental tasks" (p. 90). Such developmental perspectives on careers can support the enduring nature of life design over the life course. These theories and sources demonstrate that occupational knowledge and career

perceptions can develop and significantly impact occupational perspectives and roles during the early years. With approximately 75% of elementary school counselors' female, the increase of MESCs at the elementary level can help broaden and model occupational choices during this critical developmental period (Elementary School Counselor, 2021).

Significance of the Study

There has been limited research on the lack of MESCs (Edwards, 2013; Schmitt, 2015). The goal of this research was to explore the experiences of male elementary school counselors (MESCs) and their perspective as to what they believe contribute to the lack of MESCs at the primary level. Active interviews from MESCs about their roles, concerns, personal views, and insights were used to examine and discuss the experience of today's MESCs. The results of this study provided important information on ways to improve working conditions, encourage support, and increase recruitment and retention efforts for this particular population at the elementary school level.

A primary purpose of this study was to provide increased awareness of the experiences and perceptions of current MESCs. While there is an abundance of literature on male elementary teachers, there is a limited number of studies on men working as elementary school counselors (Dodson & Di Borders, 2006; Edwards, 2013; Schmitt, 2015). This research study is also important due to Gottfredson's theory of circumscription and compromise on the influence of student's early childhood perspectives that take place concerning the appropriateness of various careers and the future impact those perspectives can have on areas such as MESCs and other nontraditional careers (Gottfredson, 1981; Dodson & Di Borders, 2006; Edwards, 2013; Schmitt, 2015).

Another goal of this study was to bring more awareness to the educational institutions such as school districts and universities whose decisions often impact and influence this

particular population of counselors (Belkin, 2021; Cushman, 2005; Durbin, et al., 2022). Such attention can help encourage recruitment, increase retention, and facilitate discussion of men in this nontraditional career field. With increased awareness of knowledge gained from the perceptions and experiences of MESCs in this study, more support and less stigmatization will occur for this population from educational institutions and society as a whole (Cruickshank, 2019; Gueh, 2020). Finally, the findings of this study helped add to the gap in literature on the lack of MESCs.

Research Question

The research question that was used in this study evaluated the lived experiences and perceptions of MESCs and guided the development of this study. The goal of this research was to explore the experiences of male elementary school counselors (MESCs) and their perspective as to what they believe contribute to the lack of MESCs at the primary level. The research question for this study asked, "What are your experiences as a male elementary school counselor?"

The research question for this study evaluates the perspectives and experiences of MESCs (Belkin, 2021; Thompson, 2021; Wise, 2020). Issues such as parents, teachers, and administration expectations were examined (Cockrell, 2020).

Definitions

1. *American School Counselor Association (ASCA)* – A national organization for school counselors that helps maintain ethical standards, supports a professional development network for school counselors nationwide, and provides research on current trends and happenings that impact the position of a school counselor (ASCA, 2019).
2. *Elementary School* – A school with grades prekindergarten through fifth grade (McCafferty, 2022).

3. *Elementary School Counselor* – An educator with a master’s level school counseling certification trained in child development, learning, and social and emotional strategies that make up a comprehensive school counseling program to support students during this developmental period (ASCA, 2019).
4. *Elementary School Students* – Children typically five to 11 years of age (Sharifi, 2022).
5. *Hegemonic* – A belief and value system created by men that marginalizes women and men of lesser social or economic status and still upholds the legitimacy of a patriarchal institution (Jewkes et al., 2015).
6. *Lived Experiences* – The knowledge gained from choices and perceptions of individuals' conscious decisions throughout their lifetimes (Padilla-Diaz, 2015).
7. *Recruitment* – The attempt to attract a particular individual(s) to a group or organization (Michel et al., 2013).
8. *Self-efficacy* – An individual's belief regarding their ability to perform a particular task (Bandura, 1986, 1997, 2000).

Summary

The lack of MESCs is an area that few studies have explored as a result, there is a limited amount of research on this topic (Schmitt, 2015). With the changing society and social dynamics, it is important that educators and administrators fully address the social, emotional, and academic gaps that students in today's schools may experience from day to day. The field of education has a lower percentage of males than females entering the field and an even lower percentage of those males entering elementary school counseling (ASCA, 2021b). This study evaluated the reasons for the small percentage of males who become elementary school counselors and examined their personal experiences individually and collectively in school

districts in southeastern North Carolina. For this study, the term male educators also included male school counselors discussed in this research.

A qualitative study with a phenomenological approach was utilized to evaluate the perceptions of existing MESCs through interviews with each participant. Furthermore, research findings provided important and current information regarding this study and identified areas of improvement needed to increase the number of MESCs. The study can also aid universities and school districts in recruiting and retention efforts of MESCs for their programs and job positions by providing phenomenological research on this topic. The literature review and participant interviews conducted in this study can be used to provide further information on this topic, identify strategies, and evaluate data and themes that emerge from the collective evaluations of data gathered regarding this phenomenon. Finally, this study helped address the literature gap by adding study findings and research of more recent literature on this topic. The following chapter will review and analyze existing data that guided this phenomenological study. The literature evaluated for this study helped to gain a current perspective concerning the experiences of MESCs.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This chapter will provide a detailed review of the literature on issues regarding the lack of male school counselors at the elementary level. The goal of this research was to explore the experiences of male elementary school counselors (MESCs) and their perspective as to what they believe contribute to the lack of MESCs at the primary level. According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) 2020–2021 student-to-school-counselor ratio report, there are approximately 1,513,677 students in North Carolina's public schools (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2020). There are 4,638 school counselors, and about 75% of all elementary school counselors are female. In North Carolina, about 1,159 elementary school counselors are male (Elementary School Counselor, 2021). According to one school district located in southeastern North Carolina (Bryant, 2024) only two male elementary school counselors (MESCs) exist. Counties surrounding that school district, also only have one MESC in each district (Bryant, 2024). Although these numbers may vary yearly, they reflect the seriousness of the issue the study will evaluate. According to Thompson (2021), these low numbers of MESCs will continue to stay on trend with the decreasing number of males attending a four-year college and even fewer majoring in education.

Research and actions are important if a solution to this issue is to be found. With such a low number of MESCs and the limited amount of information on this subject, it is difficult to ascertain the experiences of this population's presence at the elementary level. The scant amount of current research that does exist cites the importance of increasing the number of MESCs and supporting their recruitment to provide a more balanced representation and provide students with additional role models in educational fields such as counseling (Dodson & Di Borders, 2006; Edwards, 2013; Schmitt, 2015).

While there exists a great deal of information concerning male elementary teachers, very little research can be found regarding MESC's. Male teachers, even elementary ones, have been a facet of our educational system for much longer than male school counselors. Very little research exists on male school counselors' experiences and perspectives, especially at the elementary level. Two studies by Schmitt (2015) and Edwards (2013) examined the role of MESC's through the lens of a phenomenological approach. Di Borden and Dodson's (2006) quantitative study echoed the sentiment that little research or studies existed examining nontraditional careers for men, such as MESC's.

The goal of this research was to explore the experiences of male elementary school counselors (MESC's) and their perspective as to what they believe contribute to the lack of MESC's at the primary level. This study examined this nontraditional and small percentage population through the own words of existing MESC's about various issues they have or continue to encounter daily as elementary school counselors. Through this phenomenological study, the information and insight provided by each participant was used to present results and findings that can encourage the growth and retention of this particular group of male educators. Furthermore, the aim of this study provided a firsthand understanding of existing MESC's of their views, perceptions, and personal experiences that they have encountered during their careers.

The education field has long since been an area where the presence of females was common and expected. Historical hegemonic expectations deterred many males from working in this career (Skelton, 2012). Historical expectations traced back to colonial times considered teaching as an acceptable field for females (Edwards, 2013; Schmitt, 2015). Moreover, promoting this view made the pay much lower (Patrick, 2009). This type of economic marginalization of females was viewed as a cost-saving measure by communities and acceptable since women were not considered primary providers for their families (Romano et al., 2005).

Educating and nurturing children was needed, and society considered females more suitable for this particular task. This viewpoint was especially considered true for younger children at the lower elementary level. Additionally, the Industrial Revolution also caused many males to seek employment in more profitable jobs, such as manufacturing, medicine, or other more lucrative and prestigious occupations. This period gave rise to a change in the social roles between men and women. These occupations during the industrial age provided males, who were viewed as the leaders of the homes, the financial ability to serve as the main provider for their families (Skelton, 2012).

The Industrial Revolution also increased immigration and urbanization (Edwards, 2013; Romano et al., 2005; Schmitt, 2015). Such changes in society further increased the need for education to accommodate the growing skills needed for industry and to educate the ever-growing population while also decreasing the use of child labor in the mills in industrial areas (Edwards; Romano et al.; Schmitt). The changing economy increased the need to find out the workforce's abilities and qualifications, which later led to the creation of aptitude and achievement testing (Romano et al.). After World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II, the demand for educated individuals in the workforce placed more emphasis on education and vocational guidance (Edwards, 2013; Romano et al., 2005; Schmitt, 2015).

The societal changes placed even greater demands on the educational system, which helped to begin a shift and positive change in counseling. Over time, the field would transform from guidance to school counseling. This change and development of counseling have provided significant applications and understanding of children's psychological, academic, and social needs in the school setting (Edwards, 2013; Schmitt, 2015). Contributions by early counseling personalities such as Frank Parsons, Sigmund Freud, and Carl Roger's humanistic theory stressed the importance of helping students with personal and emotional issues (Romano et al., 2005).

Furthermore, the eventual transition from a primary focus on Parson's vocational guidance to a more person-centered approach form of counseling helped to better meet students' social and emotional needs (O'Connor, 2018). This new emphasis on serving the whole child brought even greater recognition of the importance, relevance, and benefits of school counseling (Romano et al.). Finally, the National Defense and Education Act (NDEA) of 1958, created due to Russia's launching of Sputnik into space, prompted an even greater focus on education. This act emphasized increasing the number of school counselors in American schools to educate and prepare students for the evolving and growing expectations of their country (Edwards, 2013; Romano et al., 2005; Schmitt, 2015). These events and policies helped to pave the way for school counseling as it exists today.

These growing demands and expectations on school counselors and students alike have also greatly impacted the elementary level. The growing challenges of schools to meet the needs of the students they serve becomes more demanding each year (Gomez et al., 2008; Olley, 2018). The expectations by public and education officials to demonstrate effective academic growth using standardized testing continues to place additional responsibilities on an already overwhelmed educational system (Munter & Haines, 2019). The number of students experiencing social and emotional learning problems has grown substantially over the past years and, as a result, has placed even more demands on school counselors (Arslan & Allen, 2022). Schools are facing a plethora of student issues due to these problems. Having a balanced representation of school counselors, particularly at the elementary level, could help navigate certain challenges and support the unprecedented issues that both schools and students are currently experiencing.

This focus on addressing social-emotional problems that increasingly more students are experiencing highlights the urgency to have an equal representation of counselors at the

elementary level. This could help to create a more positive emotional climate for students who may relate more to a male figure (Rucinski et al., 2018). Schmitt (2015) noted that the lack of representation was especially noticeable in elementary schools, where male counselors constituted only a small number of counselors at this level. According to Farquhar (1997):

There is no evidence showing that the work performance of male [educators] is better than female [educators]. However, male and female [educators] tend to be different in how they care, interact, and play with children. It is not possible for female educators to provide a male identification figure for children, or to demonstrate how men can care and be responsible for children. (p.8)

The lack of representation of MESC's at this level is particularly important due to the many developmental milestones children experience during this period of growth (Edwards, 2013; Schmitt, 2015). Students at the elementary level form the foundation of many perspectives regarding proper roles and careers that they feel are and are not appropriate (Gottfredson, 1981; Gottfredson & Lapan, 1997; Ivers et al., 2012). As a result, such conceptions can impact student development, academics, and future career goals. Establishing more diversity at the elementary level exposes children to different individuals in the same roles. For example, in contrast to women, male educators could help boys and girls develop their conceptions of masculinity (Farquhar, 1997). Finally, another benefit of having a more balanced representation of MESC's would allow students to see firsthand multiple perspectives of handling situations that may arise in the elementary setting.

This research explored the experiences of male elementary school counselors (MESC's) and their perspective as to what they believe contribute to the lack of MESC's at the primary level. This study also evaluated the experiences of current male school counselors in an elementary setting. Their experiences were used to identify various issues of concern and where

changes and improvements are needed for MESCs at the elementary level. Utilizing the personal and unique perspectives of MESCs helped provide valuable information on areas of strengths, concerns, viewpoints, and personal perspectives as it relates to elementary school counseling from their personal experiences (Hamilton, 2020). This topic is relevant since out of approximately 75% of elementary school counselors, only 25% of those counselors are males (ASCA, 2021a). While male school counselors are needed at all levels, the greatest need is at the elementary level, as these statistics indicate. Furthermore, the lack of male school counselors in elementary schools needs to be sufficiently researched to understand the reasons for this phenomenon. This significant shortage of MESCs illustrated the need to study this occurrence further.

The objectives and research design of this study complemented each other in various ways. It was necessary to collect the concerns and issues from the small but existing population of current MESCs to understand why there is such a low number of males entering the counseling profession at the elementary level. According to Yüksel and Yildirim (2015), a qualitative phenomenological study provides the ability to identify the individual and shared perspectives of the participant sample (Hamilton, 2020). Findings generated from this research provided a clearer understanding of the perceived expectations and benefits, challenges, stigmas, barriers, and recruitment and retention needs of this population to address possible reasons for such a lack of MESCs.

Chusmir's (1990) study of males in nontraditional jobs identified several areas concerning the career choice of males who entered nontraditional fields, such as elementary education, nursing, and other nontraditional occupations. Chusmir defined a nontraditional career as any occupation where 30% or less were male workers. Since approximately only 25% of elementary

school counselors are males (ASCA, 2021b), this career fits Chusmir's (1990) definition of a nontraditional occupation for males.

According to Di Borders and Dodson's (2006) study, nontraditional occupations usually target women in these types of careers. Very few studies exist on males in nontraditional occupations. In female-dominated fields, such as education, occupational segregation keeps gender stereotypes alive, artificially constraining and limiting the abilities of men in a field such as elementary counseling (Durbin et al., 2022). Farquhar (1997) further maintains that such limited information exists because educational leaders, such as lawmakers and local and school administrators, need to advocate or come to the table to discuss how this issue can be improved. Discussions are often held about women and employment barriers and opportunities; however, a double standard exists when it comes to discussing men in education and even more so in school counseling (Belkin, 2021; Cole et al., 2019; Farquhar, 1997).

Chapter Two examines the literature on the lack of male school counselors. This study will also review the history of males in education and the stereotypical perspectives regarding males in the field. Additionally, the challenges and concerns of male school counselors and the issues they face by entering nontraditional male occupations will be examined within the literature of this study. Societal and educational pressures on MESCs as role models for the children they serve will be studied. Furthermore, this study examined recruitment and retention needs and concerns that can attract and retain more males into counseling and elementary levels. Finally, this study's theoretical and conceptual frameworks were also examined as they relate to career choice and perceptions concerning occupational expectations.

The goal of this research was to explore the experiences of male elementary school counselors (MESCs) and their perspective as to what they believe contribute to the lack of MESCs at the primary level. The primary objective was to examine these perceptions as

provided by MESCs. This qualitative phenomenological study provided insight from each of the participants interviewed. The interviews from all the participants were used to evaluate and help identify existing themes about the lack of MESCs and their experiences. A secondary objective of this study was to promote further study and investigation into this situation and provide insights and suggestions for increasing MESCs from the information gathered from study participants. This objective's accomplishment will benefit this particular subgroup of counselors. The results and findings from this study helped provide recommendations for recruiting and retaining male school counselors in the elementary setting.

Theoretical Framework

Two theories related to this topic highlighted important considerations for males who enter nontraditional careers, such as elementary school counselors. The career self-efficacy theory examines an individual's perception and career options (Betz, 1994). This theory did not look at an individual's ability but rather their perspectives about their competencies and abilities in various behavior-related domains to an occupation (Betz, 1994). Self-efficacy is seen as a complement to one's ability rather than a substitute for it (Bandura, 1986, 1997, 2000). An individual with good self-efficacy believes they can succeed in the tasks related to their chosen occupation (Betz, 2000). Self-efficacy examines a person's confidence and interest level regarding various career preferences (Betz, 2000; Lent et al., 1993; Solberg et al., 1994). Bandura's (2000) research on self-efficacy stated, "One way of creating and strengthening beliefs of personal efficacy is through social modeling. If people see others like themselves succeed by sustained effort, then they come to believe that they, too, have the capacity to do so" (p. 212). The self-efficacy theory developed by Bandura as it relates to careers also demonstrated the importance of modeling, which in turn can increase an observer's personal self-efficacy, interest,

and confidence in their ability to perform the same task or job (Betz, 1994). This theory plays an important role in choices and persistence in terms of careers.

Gottfredson's circumscription and compromise theory also relates to this studied topic. A useful application of this theory combines psychological and non-psychological factors, such as the environment that impacts one's career decision and development in that field (Gottfredson, 1981; Gottfredson & Lapan, 1997; Ivers et al., 2012). Central to both these processes were perceptions of self-job compatibility along three important dimensions: occupational sex type, prestige, and field of work (Adekson, 2019). According to Betz (1994), research indicated that sex type may limit males' career choices differently than females due to circumscription. Furthermore, Betz cited that according to Gottfredson's theory, females were much more likely to prefer and choose male-stereotypical careers than males were to select female-stereotypical careers. This theory also suggested that one's sex impacted their choice of career due to circumscription, thereby reducing career choices that they felt would be accepted and viewed as appropriate. Instead, emphasizing interests was more important since they were more inclusive (Betz, 1994).

Under Gottfredson's theory, elementary students typically form their opinions and perspectives about careers and proper roles based on sex (Gottfredson, 1981; Gottfredson & Lapan, 1997; Ivers et al., 2012). Career exploration is key to helping students succeed and navigate through stages one to three of this theory. These three stages are important since this is when students connect jobs as a role for grownups; form perspectives about job roles that they consider acceptable or unacceptable; and evaluate the prestige, social standing, sex type, and income that such a career may provide (Gottfredson, 1981; Ivers et al., 2012; Yoon & Hahn, 2021). Because these perceptions can affect future job goals, these stages constitute significant

career consideration milestones that call for specific interventions at these ages (Gottfredson, 1981; Jones & Hite, 2023).

Having professional school counselors, especially MESC's, at this key developmental time in a student's life could help provide them with a more realistic and objective assessment of their career perspectives and roles of those who perform such jobs (Dodson & Di Borders, 2006; Edwards, 2013; Schmitt, 2015). Increasing the number of MESC's could also help alleviate any stereotypes some elementary students may have developed due to societal influences and promote more open-mindedness about nontraditional careers (Edwards, 2013; Schmitt, 2015). Moreover, having a male figure at their school in a nontraditional career would provide firsthand experiences for elementary students at a critical time in their lives when they are forming decisions and perspectives about the world of work and their place in it as future adults (Dodson & Di Borders, 2006).

There were several theoretical and practical implications of this study. The goal of this research was to explore the experiences of male elementary school counselors (MESC's) and their perspective as to what they believe contribute to the lack of MESC's at the primary level. The conclusions drawn from this population provided additional knowledge regarding this phenomenon. Insight based on these implications was used to examine challenges, systems of support, and decisions regarding MESC's to guide future directions for further study.

Related Literature

Historical Context

Historically, education was provided by females to school-age children. Edwards (2013) cited that professions in education were viewed as more appropriate for females. There were many reasons for this perception regarding education. For instance, males were considered the home's primary income earner, and a schoolteacher job would not have paid enough to care for a

family (Edwards, 2013; Schmitt, 2015). This continues to be a major factor and barrier for males when deciding to enter the field of education. Likewise, females historically were paid lower wages than what a male would have been paid. This economic practice allowed for more cost savings by local school boards (Schmitt, 2015). Furthermore, females were also viewed as not having the same financial responsibilities as males, thus further attempting to justify low pay as more suitable for females. Additionally, nurturing and the education of children were considered the duty and responsibility of females. Females during this period were expected to act and carry themselves as young ladies, whereas males were given great latitude to sow seeds and do as they want to a great extent (Schmitt, 2015). This was another reason females were considered better equipped to work with children and teach than males.

Employment in education was also viewed as less prestigious for males than females (Schmitt, 2015). People, especially during the 1800s, were judged based on the expected stereotypical roles and perspectives they should exhibit as determined by their gender (Deutsch, 2007). In Western cultures, males are expected to appear and exhibit stereotypical masculine behaviors, which makes it difficult for male elementary teachers to display care and concern for their students without appearing suspect. During this time, male teachers' actions and behaviors were constantly scrutinized for fear or concern of inappropriate behavior between the male teacher and students (Hansen & Mulholland, 2005).

However, as females gained more rights and freedoms and education became more diversified into elementary, middle, and secondary grades, the number of females entering the field of education grew substantially. Eventually, the public viewed the educational field as too feminized, and a call for male teachers became important (Schmitt, 2015). Today, females continue to dominate the field of education, including school counseling (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Hickman (2020) stated:

The history of school counseling has depicted a profession in search of an identity. Changes in society and movements within the profession have resulted in various interpretations and misconceptions about the school counselor role (p. 8).

Nationwide, counseling, or vocational guidance was established in the early 1900s to help prepare young people to enter the workforce (Scott, 2018). Later in the 1960s, the transition from the sole focus of vocational guidance to school counseling to include the whole child was made. Over time, school counseling developed and transitioned to all levels of education, undergoing a major transformation during the 21st century (Schmaltz, 2016). While societal attitudes concerning males in education have changed substantially, the idea of masculinity has failed to evolve with it.

Although positive changes have been taking place in the field of counseling, the lack of males, particularly in the lower educational levels, continues to be an issue. Thus, this area of education continues to be an occupation in which females make up the main percentage (ASCA, 2021b). Today, the public and educators are calling for more males in counseling, specifically at the elementary level, to have a more balanced representation and to ensure that the needs of all students are met (Majzub & Rais, 2010).

Previous studies had focused, for the most part, on male teachers in an elementary setting. Very little research has been conducted on the lack of MESC's (Cruickshank, 2019). Existing research on MESC's dealt greatly with the issue and impact of gender in a predominantly female occupation (Cruickshank, 2019; Cushman, 2005). The goal of this research was to explore the experiences of male elementary school counselors (MESC's) and their perspectives as to what they believe contribute to the lack of MESC's at the primary level. The literature in this study focused on the existing MESC's, who currently comprise a small part

of the elementary counseling population, and their unique experiences, feelings, and perspectives. Furthermore, this research and literature evaluated other aspects of this issue, such as societal issues, MESC perspectives, and the need for a more balanced representation in the profession (Edwards, 2013; Schmitt, 2015).

Professional school counseling has undergone many changes throughout the years. Early in this profession, guidance counselors focused on career readiness and preparedness by guiding and advising students on the various career paths or work options (Porter, 2020). Overtime, the terminology was changed from guidance counselors to professional school counselors to reflect the many other school roles counselors performed (Dodson & Di Borders, 2006). Emphasis was no longer solely placed on just secondary students but now also included children from kindergarten to 12th grade. Career exploration was still a key focus; however, meeting and addressing the child's social, emotional, and educational needs became the core component of a comprehensive school counseling program and the responsibility of the professional school counselor (Wingfield et al., 2010). Today, school counselors have many duties and responsibilities they are expected to fulfill. These multiple roles include mentoring individuals, small groups, and whole groups; being a consultant; advocate, coordinator, academic interventionist, overseer of student records, crisis interventionist, and interpreter of student assessments (ASCA, 2021a).

While school counseling has been redefined in education, so have the roles and societal expectations of males and females in the field. Education has, for the most part, been a field primarily dominated by females, with the exception of more males in leadership positions (NCES, 2023). However, over the decades, the public call for more males in education to serve as positive role models and the desire to have a balanced representation has brought the issue of males in education to the forefront of educational reform. Nationwide, 24% of those working in

education are male. Out of this 24%, only approximately 11% of these males work in an elementary setting (NCES, 2020). Furthermore, out of 16,022 total elementary school counselors in the United States, 75% are female, and only 25% are male, meaning there are approximately 4,005 MESCs nationally (Elementary School Counselor, 2021). In addition, this trend shows no sign of increasing. On the contrary, compared to percentages from 1999-2000 to 2017-2018, the number of males in education had decreased by two percent (NCES, 2022). This trend is clear evidence of the shortage of male educators. However, even with less representation, they are often expected to serve as role models for the students they see.

MESCs as Role Models

Having male and female counselors to meet the needs of students is essential to ensure that all students are supported in the best way possible. Also, with today's more diverse student population, including more men in the elementary setting is important to provide more options for students and additional forms of support (Cruickshank et al., 2022). Furthermore, the low number of MESCs is significant for various reasons. This area of education and its impact on student well-being and learning at the elementary level is vital (Edwards, 2013). When the rate of single parents' homes without a male presence increases, having a male figure present in the early developmental stages of elementary students' lives can be significant (Vespa, 2021; Wood & Brownhill, 2016). In 2021, there were 36,828 families with children under the age of 18 years. Out of that number, 25,812 were two-parent families. Furthermore, there were 11,016 one-parent families, of which 8,765 were with the mother and only 2,251 were with the father (Vespa, 2021).

Today, many male youths are often portrayed negatively and struggle to find their identity and sense of self without proper role models. With more male educators, it is the hope of parents and school communities that young males will have an appropriate role model to show

them about behavior and academic milestones that they have the potential to obtain (Cushman, 2008). Many young females also experience life without a male presence in their environment. Having MESC's can serve as an example of how males can positively impact their lives and others. Specifically, MESC's can serve as important role models and can help children who lack the presence of a male figure in their life to be able to see and experience the positive attributes of males in such a key developmental phase in their young lives. In fact, male educators may encourage their male students to pursue a job in education because of their mentorship and influence. Furthermore, students' ability to relate to MESC's also requires more study and exploration. The scant amount of research that had been conducted on this topic focused only on gender disparities and not on actual firsthand experiences (Dodson & Di Borders, 2006; Evans, 2013).

Many educators and parents feel that it is important to increase the number of MESC's. Some advocates cite that having more male figures at the elementary level was essential, especially with the high number of absentee fathers (McGrath & Sinclair, 2013). This period of a child's life is a key developmental phase, and a male presence is important. Having positive male role models in a child's life is vital. For example, Wood and Brownhill (2016) state that male educators often felt the need to serve as role models for both males and females who may have come from single-parent homes with only their mothers. In addition, other teachers echoed this sentiment that more male educators are needed to serve in this capacity due to a high rate of single female-parent homes (Lahelma, 2000; Warin, 2019). Additionally, other proponents who supported an increase in MESC's cited the need for a more equal or balanced representation of males and females in these areas due to the milestones and perceptions of children at this critical developmental stage (Davis & Hay, 2018).

Given the moral panic over the growing gender disparity in academic achievement between boys and girls, it has also been thought of as a way to support male students. It is evident, based on the numbers, that males are underrepresented in this area (NCES, 2020). The lack of male school counselors in elementary schools needs to be sufficiently researched to better understand the reasons for this situation. Previous research on this topic had primarily focused on gender in nontraditional roles (Dodson & Di Borders, 2006; Edwards, 2013; Schmitt, 2015). The goal of this research was to explore the experiences of male elementary school counselors (MESCs) and their perspective as to what they believe contribute to the lack of MESCs at the primary level. The research in this study was based on actual interviews with MESCs about their role as professional school counselors, including challenges, personal experiences, and insights specifically as a MESC. This information was used to evaluate and discuss their overall lived experience. This study also examined the many challenges and stigmas that MESCs experience and the paradoxical expectations held by colleagues such as teachers and administrators.

Challenges and Stereotypes

Stroud et al. (2000) pointed to four common obstacles that discouraged more males from entering early childhood or elementary education; these included stereotypical attitudes, non-counseling duties, poor compensation, and lack of prestige as an educator. These obstacles served as further barriers to males serving as school counselors in the elementary field. Stereotypes and gender-based occupational segregation also restricted men and prevented them from choosing various careers, such as elementary school counseling (Karpova et al., 2018). Finally, these stereotypes perpetuate hegemonic expectations held by what is otherwise considered a modern society (Stroud et al., 2000).

Many male educators, such as elementary school counselors, want to demonstrate care and compassion toward their students. However, they are unable to do this in the same way that

female counselors and teachers can due to negative stereotypes (Cruickshank et al., 2022). This desire to be looked at the same way as female educators regarding emotional support to students is often difficult for many male educators due to societal perspectives. Moss-Racusin and Johnson (2016) cited those males who typically entered female-dominated areas, such as elementary education, may have been labeled as gay or deviant for choosing careers traditionally regarded as feminine. Likewise, Davis and Hay (2018) cited those males who worked with children of elementary age also faced scrutiny during interactions with students due to pedophilic fears and societal concerns. McGrath and Van Bergen (2017) predicted that in 50 years, Australia would have no male primary teachers due to the fear of being accused of being inappropriate with a student.

This scrutiny of male educators is not just confined to Australia but also to most countries. Cruickshank (2019) cited studies in other countries, such as the United Kingdom, South Africa, and Canada, where similar suspicions and stigmas of male primary educators were also experienced. Male educators are so concerned with this accusation that in a focus group of male primary educators, 67% of the participants rated their fear of being accused of abusing a child at a moderate to high level (Cruickshank, 2019; Cushman, 2005). The damage to a male educator who is accused of inappropriate behavior or actions against a child can be irreparable to their reputation, even when proven innocent in many cases.

Furthermore, differences in socialization, societal expectations, and occupational gender segregation might affect the choice of college majors and subsequent career paths in fields such as elementary counseling (Karpova et al., 2018). Cruickshank et al. (2022) cited the need to focus on retaining male primary teachers by developing coping strategies and support while serving in this capacity. As a result, such stigmas can decrease the number of male role models available, negatively impacting male students from deciding to work in an elementary setting

(Davis & Hay, 2018). Finally, the stress of how to respond in some instances and situations, along with the constant pressure regarding such issues, can also lead to a decrease in the number of males entering the education field as MESCs.

Many male educators stated that they implemented specific procedures and practices so that there was no question of improper contact with their students. For example, if a student needed to see them, they made sure that their door was open or they went to a common area, such as the library, so that there was another adult (most often female) who saw them from afar (Cruickshank et al., 2022). Other coping and management strategies included such practices as having a female present if the child appeared or became upset and needed a hug or physical contact. Even when setting up counseling offices MESCs do so by keeping in mind to minimize any possibility of dealing improperly with students.

Male educators' lack of physical contact sends a message that males cannot or should not be as nurturing as their female counterparts. In turn, this unintended message can have a lasting impression on elementary children regarding their perceptions and perspectives about appropriate practices and occupations for males. Still, according to Cruickshank et al. (2022), this was the most viable solution for many male educators to avoid inappropriate behavior by utilizing such strategies.

Other male educators stated that they used alternative methods to relate and connect with their students, such as saying positive affirmations, playing games or sports during free time, using humor, giving high-fives, shaking hands, and giving fist bumps (Cruickshank et al., 2022). Cruickshank et al. (2022), also identified strategies, such as compensatory activities, that male educators used when making physical contact with their students. These activities benefit students and can help develop rapport between them and male educators. However, the fact remains that two different standards exist for male educators and female educators when

interacting with students. Such double standards resonate with the exact hegemonic expectations and perspectives about males as in previous years regarding education and nurturing their students (Cruickshank et al., 2022; Skelton, 2012). The avoidance of any physical contact or the application of isolation by male educators with students can send an unintended message to students about appropriate behavior based on their sex (Cruickshank et al., 2022; Lahelma, 2000). Unfortunately, male educators, especially MESC's in individual counseling situations, must be cautious when attending to the needs of their students for fear of public ridicule or accusations of inappropriate words or touches with a child. Finally, participants in Cruickshank et al.'s (2022) study cited the importance of advanced planning concerning potential scenarios or situations with a student that others could view as inappropriate. They stressed the importance of being proactive instead of reactive.

This mindset and stereotypes around MESC's and other male educators will only change when hegemonic expectations that are still perpetuated on males by societal and cultural constraints and media are discarded. Also, for change to occur, males need to feel supported by providing a nurturing atmosphere or physical contact, such as a hug, without being looked upon with suspicion and mistrust. Males inadvertently encourage these hegemonic expectations to protect themselves by avoiding physical contact with students (Cruickshank, 2019). If these challenges continue to exist, the number of MESC's will continue to drop or maintain this level of counseling. The call from universities, school districts, and parents for increased numbers of male educators will continue to go unanswered.

A school counselor's job is multi-faceted, with many different duties and responsibilities (Cockrell, 2020; Schmaltz, 2016). However, for MESC's, their duties and responsibilities go far beyond the scope of their roles as school counselors. Jackson et al. (2010) stated that males employed in these predominately female careers, such as education and school counseling, often

experienced role strain due to society's perception of standard roles, negatively impacting their family life.

A study conducted using the Counselor Occupational Stress Inventory (COSI), counselors experienced higher levels of stress in areas such as "financial security, nonprofessional duties, professional job overload, counselor-teacher professional relationship, and counselor-principal professional relationships" (Schmaltz, 2016, p. 17). Accordingly, when asked, many principals acknowledged and recognized the counseling duties versus the non-counseling job responsibilities of a school counselor. However, they admitted that when it specifically came to male counselors, they often asked them to perform duties or job functions outside of their defined roles, which could have impeded their work or roles with students (Lewis-Jones, 2012; Schmaltz, 2016; Warin, 2019).

While such factors are not solely exclusive to MESC's, they are certainly a contributor to concerns that MESC's have regarding a career in counseling (Edwards, 2013; Moracco et al., 1984; Schmaltz, 2016; Schmitt, 2015). The ambiguity that many MESC's experience from their principals regarding their actual versus their perceived job roles discourages many males from remaining or even entering the field of school counseling at the elementary level (Lewis-Jones, 2012).

A study by Joseph (2016) cited that many males stated that educational salaries, including that of a school counselor, were insufficient to financially provide for families. Furthermore, a field that is primarily female such as counseling and education, may indirectly cause the salary for that occupation to be lower than for male-dominated fields (Willyard, 2011). As a result, Stroud et al. (2000) explained that educators seek summer employment to compensate for their low salaries. In fact, according to the May 2021 Occupational Outlook Handbook, the 2021 median pay for a school counselor averaged \$60,510 in 2021, and elementary teachers' median

pay was \$61,350 (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021a). While these figures may not seem significantly different, the teacher's salary is based on having a bachelor's degree, whereas the school counselors' salary is based on a required master's degree to serve in their role. As a result, many male educators prefer to work at the middle and high school levels due to the additional monetary opportunities, such as coaching and other after-school activities, to supplement their income (Schmitt, 2015). Lastly, due to salary issues such as these, many male educators like MESCs transition to other educational positions like principals or district leadership, citing higher salaries in these positions as major factors in their decision.

Another reason for such a small number of MESCs is that even by today's societal standards, as was the case early in the field, education is still not viewed as a prestigious career. Males still avoid female-dominated occupations and frequently face social pressure and challenges when they do enter a nontraditional male career, such as an elementary school counselor (Ferrari, 2016). A study by Karpova et al. (2018) further cited that "males do who have interest in pursuing nontraditional college majors and occupations (such as elementary school counseling) might also be discouraged because of negative stereotypes of lower social [and economic] status associated with female occupations and gender role strain." Deeply ingrained gender norms are still prevalent in the home and educational systems (Warin, 2019).

According to Gottfredson's theory of circumscription and compromise, male educators may seek more highly regarded positions instead of occupations such as MESCs to adhere to the traditional hegemonic view of male roles (Jackson et al., 2010). In addition to the fact that the role of the nurturer is still viewed as more appropriate for females, male educators still must contend with society's belief that working with children is not a masculine occupation, as well as also being asked to perform duties or roles outside of the scope of a MESC. The theory explains that one eliminates possible career paths that are viewed as incompatible with a social image or

because of their perceived inaccessibility (e.g., an occupation associated with another gender) (Karpova et al., 2018). This career decision-making process can often occur early in the elementary years.

The lack of male school counselors is a significant problem at the elementary level. As a result, the various challenges they encounter due to this phenomenon will be examined in this study. The goal of this research was to explore the experiences of male elementary school counselors (MESCs) and their perspective as to what they believe contribute to the lack of MESCs at the primary level. This study was based on interviews with MESCs about their roles, concerns, personal views, and insights at the elementary level. It explored and describe the perceptions of MESCs from school districts located in southeastern North Carolina to gain a phenomenological understanding of their perceived challenges. The research findings from this study were used to evaluate and discuss the experience of today's MESC. Furthermore, through information obtained from existing MESC's interview questions, helpful suggestions and insights about recruitment and retention efforts will be important for future growth in this area. This study helped give a voice to the existing MESCs while simultaneously encouraging and supporting other males who are considering a job as a MESC.

Increasing the Number of MESCs

Partnerships

School counselors work in tandem with teachers and administrators; as a result, there is a need to collaborate. They must work together to ensure that their student's social, emotional, and academic needs are met (Perkins, 2013). Furthermore, according to the ASCA (2019b), under competency B-SS 5, collaboration with essential stakeholders is important in order to promote student achievement and success in all areas. The lack of integration of ASCA's (2019a) national model is a major contributor to administrators' and teachers' misconceptions concerning the

proper role of school counselors (Cockrell, 2020; Reiner et al., 2009). Effective communication and education of counseling programs for teachers and administrators can help school counselors be more successful in implementing a comprehensive counseling program and improve the lack of understanding about the proper roles of elementary school counselors.

Misconceptions by school principals or administration are particularly troubling, especially for MESC's, whose roles may be under scrutiny by stakeholders more than their female counterparts. For example, a national study found that approximately 80% of school principals selected non-appropriate duties for school counselors under guidelines in the ASCA model (Cockrell, 2020; Costello, 2019). In this study, MESC's will provide their perspectives and insights regarding the dynamics between male counselors, teachers, and administrators at the elementary level and how those interactions could be more effective. This insight can provide clarification for whether teachers' and MESC's relationships and interactions are a positive experience or if they serve as a barrier to encouraging males from entering this school level as a counselor (Villares et al., 2021). The role of MESC's and their perspectives on how they feel they are viewed and supported by teachers will be important when examining support systems or the lack thereof within an elementary school from teachers and administrators (Villares et al., 2021).

Teacher and leadership support and cooperation are crucial for school counselors to be successful and actively collaborate, consult with colleagues, and effectively counsel students who need help (Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008; Scott, 2018; Thomas, 2011). MESC's and other males in elementary education struggle with challenges and stereotypes that result from hegemonic expectations of their proper roles. As males working in a nontraditional occupation, the scrutiny they face on a day-to-day basis can be very taxing and impacts the number of male educators that decide to stay or leave elementary education.

The school counselor's role is heavily defined by the administration (Smith, 2022). Teachers and other staff members will typically follow the actions of a principal in how they see, relate, and incorporate school counselors' roles within the school setting (Clark & Amatea, 2004; Cockrell, 2020). As a result, having a solid working alliance with administrators who are knowledgeable and supportive of such roles is critical. Also, maintaining an open dialogue with school counselors, especially MESC's, who already feel under-supported, will be essential to promote their retention and enable MESC's to help promote their students' academic success (Cockrell, 2020; Edwards, 2013; Schmitt, 2015). The irony of societal demands for more male educators while maintaining traditional and hegemonic views creates a paradox for males considering elementary counseling as a possible occupation.

One important resource that MESC's depend on and state that is important to their position as male educators is the assistance and mentorship from teachers and administrative leaders. For example, teachers are directly in contact with students for much of the school day, and as a result, the school counselor needs their input and partnership when they need help from the teacher concerning a student (Clark & Amatea, 2006; Cockrell, 2020). In a study by Cruickshank (2019), MESC's depended on female teachers to assist them when working with students, particularly in a one-to-one setting. Likewise, MESC's working with small groups or individuals would work near to other teachers to prevent any hint of impropriety from being suggested. Moreover, participants cited the ability and willingness of female teachers to step in if closer inspection of a child was needed or if the child needed to be consoled (Cruickshank, 2019; Cruickshank et al., 2022). Lastly, male educators described the value of having veteran male educators who served as mentors and gave valuable advice and suggestions on how to be effective counselors or teachers while also protecting themselves from suspicion of inappropriate behavior by school community members. Having supportive leaders who set clear guidelines,

provide meaningful professional development for dealing with conflict and role expectations, and encourage collegial support can also assist males like MESC's in doing their job and successfully helping students in need (Smith, 2022).

The goal of this research was to explore the experiences of male elementary school counselors (MESC's) and their perspective as to what they believe contribute to the lack of MESC's at the primary level. The need for such research to be conducted is important in understanding why this problem exists. Interviewing existing MESC's and learning from their insights based on their experiences will be important. This phenomenological research also aided in providing a coherent understanding of viable solutions from actual MESC's which can help increase the number of male school counselors at the elementary level.

Recruitment and Retention

A focus on retention and recruitment strategies is needed to encourage more males to enter at the elementary level. Counselor education programs are the profession's gatekeeper and the incubator of school counselors working with a diverse population of students and families. These programs have a moral responsibility to the field to be more intentional in their inclusivity and recruitment efforts (Cross & Reinhart, 2017; Gueh, 2020). Universities must be more aggressive in recruiting males in general due to the lack of males attending college (Belkin, 2021). For example, Belkin (2021) cited that if the decrease of males in higher education continued, there would be two females to every male earning a college degree. This trend has been increasing for the past 40 years and shows no signs of decreasing (Belkin, 2021). Likewise, Smedley and Pepperell (2000) maintained that for many years the focus had been on females going to college and that males are becoming the "new disadvantaged" (p. 260). More females are earning a higher educational degree today than men (Belkin, 2021). If an increased number of MESC's is to happen, increasing the number of males entering college must change.

Educational institutions must find a better way of attracting and keeping males in education, including MESCs.

While the overall recruitment and retention of males in higher education is extremely low, out of those males who enter college, even fewer choose to become male educators (Hansen & Mulholland, 2005). Of these, even fewer decide to work at the primary or elementary level, especially in school counseling (Davis & Hay, 2018). Educational bodies and parents have called for more male primary teachers; however, the numbers continue to drop (Cruickshank et al., 2022; McGrath & Van Bergen, 2017). There need to be more male educators in areas like elementary schools (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2020). The lack of MESCs and strategies to attract and retain more must first be examined at the university level in educational and counseling programs (Belkin, 2021; Schmitt, 2015). Suggestions, improvements, and practices must be determined and implemented to encourage more males to enter school counseling programs. Moreover, more work must be done to encourage these counselors to work at the elementary level.

At the university level, the number of male students entering the counseling program is extremely low compared to that of female students (Belkin, 2021; Thompson, 2021). Both high school and college counselors must recommend education to males as a career option (Stroud et al., 2000). Providing mentoring to school counseling students will be important in helping aspiring male elementary school counselors complete their university's requirements (Aubrey, 1967). Likewise, O'Connor (2018) cited that school counselors wished that universities aligned their programs to be more in line with what the school counselor experiences at the school level. This more practical experience would give school counselors a more realistic picture of their roles and expectations while on the job, which could encourage them to stay in the field of school counseling. Another way of encouraging more MESCs is by having existing male

educators serve as mentors to promote and encourage male entry into counseling through events such as college career fairs (Hansen & Mulholland, 2005; Wise, 2020). In addition, pairing male students with current MESCs when completing internships could also help promote the recruitment and retention of male educators at the elementary level (Wise, 2020). For example, male school counseling students who worked with male supervisors during their internship and practicum believed that having that interaction normalized their experience (Willyard, 2011).

Furthermore, increasing this population is necessary to make the workplace more inclusive for male educators and counselors in elementary schools (Warin, 2019). Stakeholders' perceptions of school counselors and their roles must also be considered to help promote and facilitate the counseling program (Perkins, 2013). Finally, advisor and mentor support in the college programs of MESC candidates can help provide additional guidance throughout their college training (Stewart et al., 2016). The university school counseling programs must give their counseling students, especially students in nontraditional areas of counseling like males in the elementary level, the support needed to succeed.

Other recruitment and retention strategies can be utilized to encourage more male school counselors to work at the elementary level. Advertising education and school counseling programs targeting males could attract them in the elementary setting (Godfrey & Manis, 2017). The media can greatly influence people's educational and career choices. Another important strategy is to increase the salaries of school counselors (Schmitt, 2015). Males may stay in counseling, especially at the elementary level, if they feel more financially secure. Additionally, offering scholarships to males to enter elementary counseling positions could help increase the number of male educators at this level (Stroud, 2000). Support groups of male educators and male cohorts could also help retain and recruit MESCs (Cole et al., 2019). Organizations like

NYC Men Teach can provide support and helpful advice for men working in elementary education (Cole et al., 2019).

Another issue that interferes with the retention of MESCs is that many MESCs are expected to take on extra roles and duties outside the scope of their job descriptions. Many times, male counselors will serve multiple roles other than their job as a school counselor (Edwards, 2013; Pruitt, 2019). In fact, ASCA (2021a) stated that specific duties for school counselors are inappropriate if they include supervisory or leadership activities, such as assisting with principal-related duties, including discipline, assigning punishment for behavioral infractions, or supervising classes. According to Lewis-Jones' (2012) study, elementary school counselors reported they felt insufficiently prepared in their knowledge of how to effectively work and collaborate with their principals.

This issue is important to address to prevent role confusion between the principal and counselor and to help the counselor gain support for a comprehensive school counseling program. Also, the excessively high cost of college and lack of direction of some young males causes them to question the feasibility and practicality of obtaining a college degree (Belkin, 2021). Although ASCA guidelines have been established for many years, school counselors, especially MESCs, are often asked to perform duties other than their role as counselors (Pruitt, 2019). MESCs who work at small or rural schools may experience this even more since they may be the only male presence at the school.

The expectation to take on the specified duties of an elementary school counselor is further exacerbated due to the hegemonic expectations placed on males by society. Furthermore, because many male school counselors are expected to take on positions of authority, they will often seek other occupations, such as principals or other administrative positions, citing that they have already been performing many of these functions (Schmitt, 2015). Commonly referred to as

the glass ceiling or "glass elevator," many MESCs seek and achieve higher positions in education (Turkmen & Eskin Bacaksiz, 2021, p. 1276). Many of these individuals cited higher wages, more prestige, and less threat of accusation or suspicion of inappropriate behavior with a student as the reasons for transitioning to administrative positions.

Professional development for administrative and school staff about the duties that MESCs are responsible for on a day-to-day basis may also help support and retain MESCs.

Administrative staff, such as principals, may have been former teachers themselves and need more ideas or awareness of the duties or responsibilities of elementary school counselors (Pruitt, 2019). Additional training not just for MESCs but also for principals could help improve conditions for MESCs by understanding the ASCA national model and appropriate rules and responsibilities of elementary school counselors (Clark & Amatea, 2004; Cockrell, 2020).

Moreover, offering male and female educators a chance to work together, such as collaborating on a school project or teaching an interdisciplinary lesson, can make MESCs feel additionally supported in the elementary setting and a part of a team.

Summary

The knowledge gained from the findings of this study was useful in providing recommendations and identifying resources that could positively impact improving the experiences of current MESCs. This research explored the experiences of male elementary school counselors (MESCs) and their perspective as to what they believe contribute to the lack of MESCs at the primary level. The information from this research was synthesized by identifying existing themes through the experiences of MESCs with this phenomenon (Strunk et al., 2015). The participants' perspectives and overall findings of this study will aid in future research on this topic by providing ways to improve conditions and increase the number of MESCs.

The implications for this study will also help those individuals and systems contributing to the school counseling profession, such as universities, school districts, and state and national school counseling organizations, understand the factors influencing the lack of MESCs. The results of this study will assist such groups in identifying and correcting barriers that MESCs often encounter and make meaningful changes that can help improve conditions and graduation rates, recruitment, and retention of MESCs. This study can also help to increase the recruitment of males into counseling at the elementary level.

The few studies that pertain to this topic need to address certain questions relevant to the personal experiences of today's MESCs and their perceptions of their job (Edwards, 2013; Schmitt, 2015). The information in these studies still holds true; however, they do not factor in current societal issues and concerns that impact elementary counseling. The research on this topic identified several themes that will allow for further collaboration and investigation of this occurrence. Studies such as this one that overlaps, relate, or share common themes concerning the issue of more male counselors in elementary schools provide valuable insight into how to encourage more growth in this area of school counseling.

These research findings aim to encourage the increase the number of MESCs and change stereotypical views that some individuals have about this role. Overall, these cited studies demonstrated the importance of understanding the reasons for the lack of MESCs. The shared perspectives and experiences of the participants in this phenomenological study helped shed light on the lack of MESCs. This deeper understanding can increase support for existing counselors and encourage the retention and recruitment of this important group of individuals within elementary schools for all students.

Chapter Three will evaluate the methodology for this study. The rationale for selecting a phenomenological study and the research benefits will be explained. Furthermore, the procedures

such as selection, setting, participant rights, and safeguards will also be addressed in the following chapter. The data collection and research process will also be reviewed, and the safeguards that were put in place to protect and respect participants' rights and confidentiality. Finally, Chapter Three will also discuss the study's implications and potential future applications for its findings.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

A qualitative phenomenological research design is proposed for this study. The goal of this research was to explore the experiences of male elementary school counselors (MESC) and their perspective as to what they believe contribute to the lack of MESC at the primary level. A phenomenological study is appropriate as MESC study participants' individual and collective experiences were examined and evaluated as well as it allowed the participants' shared perspectives to be identified as well (Yüksel & Yildirim, 2015). This approach is appropriate for this study as the individual experiences of MESC study participants were reviewed to identify themes concerning this phenomenon (Strunk, 2015). The main purpose of phenomenology is to understand the experience from the subjects' perspectives and lived experiences of said population (Yüksel & Yildirim, 2015).

Phenomenological studies begin and end with the actual experiences of the participant who has had a "meaningful and significant" connection with the occurrence being investigated (Yüksel & Yildirim, 2015, p. 5). A phenomenological study should comprise a comparable group of study participants (Wise, 2020). The intent of this phenomenological approach was to draw logical conclusions and gain additional knowledge through the lived experiences of people who make up this phenomenon to guide further study of this issue. The purpose of this study also explored and described the perceptions and experiences of MESC from school districts located in southeastern North Carolina to gain a better perspective of their experiences and perceived challenges.

Design

This study analyzed the experiences and perceptions expressed by MESC. Qualitative research highlights the insights and perspectives of the study's participants (Denny &

Weckesser, 2019). Qualitative research should be “relevant, timely, significant, interesting, or evocative” (Tracy, 2010, p. 840). Regarding this research, a qualitative study highlighted the collective experiences of MESC. Utilizing a transcendental phenomenological approach in this study was appropriate as the collective experiences of MESC study participants was examined and evaluated (Strunk, 2015).

Husserl (1936/1970), a key contributor to phenomenology, believed that equal value existed between one’s objective and subjective experiences. Transcendental phenomenology relies on one’s ability to stand apart from their own subjections and remain unbiased as the “inner self” of a participant provide their experiences of the situation being researched (Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 93). It is important to become a “blank slate” when conducting research during this process, relying only on what the participants have lived and experienced (Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 93). In transcendental phenomenology, researchers will experience the phenomenon through participants’ accounts as if it were their first time knowing or learning of such an experience (Husserl, 1936/1970). Neubauer et al. (2019) cited that to assure the fidelity of transcendental phenomenological research, “robust phenomenological research involves deep engagement with the data via reading, reflective writing, re-reading and re-writing” (p. 95).

For this study, criterion-based selection and purposeful sampling of the participant population’s salient and impactful experiences was evaluated to study this phenomenon. Pre-interviews for screening purposes and participant interviews were utilized to clearly understand the population being evaluated. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data from research participants, and additional follow-up questions were used to clear up any ambiguities. At the end of this data collection process, the essential essence of the experiences of the study participants was interpreted.

Research Question

The research question for this transcendental phenomenological study addressed the lack of current perspectives from the actual perceptions and lived experiences of MESC. This research question was formulated to provide insight into the experiences of MESC. There is an identifiable gap in the literature when examining the reasons for such a low percentage of MESC and their perceptions of why this phenomenon exists. This question was developed to respond to the topic being studied. The findings generated from this question helped to provide meaningful firsthand insight into the experiences of MESC. The data gathered from these research question also helped to identify themes, further providing insight and knowledge about ways to increase the recruitment and retention of MESC.

Setting

The interviews were conducted via Zoom. This format was used in order to accommodate all participants equally. Participants were asked to choose a site with privacy and a reliable internet connection. Privacy was important to allow the participants to feel free to respond honestly and to ensure that the confidentiality of the content of the interview is maintained. A review of informed consent and interview procedures was conducted with each participant prior to the interview. All questions were answered and addressed to ensure that the participants were well informed and aware of the study they were a part of once they agreed to participate. Participants were also reminded that the interview would be recorded and all comments transcribed. All interview questions were asked exactly as written to ensure the same meaning to each participant in the study (Fowler, 2014). Procedures, such as the use of participant pseudonyms and member checking for accuracy, were also used. The participants were provided the opportunity to choose their own pseudonyms which is referenced in the findings of this study. The use of pseudonyms is important to prevent the possibility of identifying any of the

participants currently employed by a school district. Additionally, participants were reminded that they could withdraw from the study at any time if they choose to do so.

Participants

A criterion-based selection and purposeful sampling was used to determine the participants and this population's salient experiences of the phenomenon being evaluated in this study. A recruitment email (see Appendix A) specifying participant requirements for screening purposes determined if study participants met the criteria and requirements of the population being examined. The criteria for participation in this research are the following:

1. Must be a male.
2. Must be 18 years of age.
3. Must have been an elementary school counselor for two years or more.

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), the number of participants in a qualitative study is determined by the design utilized. In a phenomenological study, a sample size can involve 3-10 participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Further support for an appropriate sample size is cited in the literature on qualitative study by Creswell and Poth (2018), who state that a heterogeneous group "may vary in size from 3-4 individuals to 10-15" (p. 76). For this research, there were nine participants selected that met the inclusion criteria to be a part of this study. Participants for this study included only MESC's who have served in that capacity for two or more years. The requirement of two years is important since the participants would need to have worked in the field for enough time to have had experiences to share perceptions of their time as a MESC (Melnick & Meister, 2008). A request for participation were sent to school districts in southeastern counties in North Carolina (see Appendix B). Once permission was granted by the local education agencies of each of these counties, a request for participation to all MESC's was

sent via email (see Appendix A). Responses from participants who met the criteria and agreed to participate in the study were selected.

The participants' input was the core of the data collected that was used to address the research question relevant to this study and present related findings. Qualitative data was generated through the interviews that took place via Zoom, an online video platform, and the participant's responses were recorded and transcribed to use for further study development. The data was used to identify themes, implications, and overall findings. Interviews were stored electronically on a password-protected computer and all hard copies of documents were stored in a locked cabinet. Finally, pseudonyms were used for each participant, and research participants were also asked to verify their interview transcript to further ensure accuracy.

Purposeful sampling was used in this qualitative phenomenological study. This type of sampling allowed the capability to choose the participants for their study who experienced the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Using judgment in purposeful sampling is a nonrandom way to ensure that the correct participants were included to meet the study's aims (Campbell et al., 2020). The use of purposeful sampling ensures research objectives were met and trustworthiness in the data results (Mason, 2002; Robinson, 2014; Trost, 1986). Purposeful sampling ensured that this study's participants were selected to accomplish research objectives. To ensure sufficient participants, other MESCs fitting the specified criteria were recruited from other surrounding counties in southeastern North Carolina adjacent to the original counties where participation was initially requested. Finally, there were no incentives offered to individuals who participated in this study.

Procedures

The first step of this study was to obtain approval and permission from Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). This step was necessary before any interviewing

and data collection from participants could take place (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). In an effort to recruit participants for this study, a letter was sent to the Director of Student Services (see Appendix B) of each of the school districts selected for this study which requested permission to send an email to the MESCs in their district. Emails from all interested participants were gathered, and a time was scheduled to discuss the study with each participant. Introductions were made, and the design and goals of the study were explained to the participants. The scope and intent of the study was also made clear to each participant, and they were provided with the necessary information needed to make an informed decision concerning the study. The issue of confidentiality was reviewed with each research participant. All potential benefits or risks was explained to each participant. All participants were informed in writing and verbally that all communication and interviews would be recorded and documented. A review of the criteria and requirements needed to participate was also given to each participant in the study. Informed consent was obtained when individuals agree to participate in the study. Additionally, each participant received contact information, such as phone number and email if they had any further questions or concerns about the study. This information was included in all the correspondence regarding this study to all participants. These preparatory steps occurred prior to the commencement of the interviews.

Participants responded to open-ended interview questions related to the research question in the study. Interviews were scheduled during a time that was convenient for the participant. All interviews were recorded and transcribed to reflect each research participant's exact statements or responses. The recording of each interview took place using Zoom and was transcribed using Otter.ai. Each interview lasted for approximately 45 to 60 minutes with each participant. Member checking was conducted by each participant where they were asked to read and sign the transcript text to verify the accuracy of their interview.

Several instruments were utilized in the development and completion of this study. A demographic questionnaire (see Appendix C) provided background information on each participant, such as age, race, cultural background, and location. The questionnaire was completed online using the program Qualtrics XM prior to the interview along with the consent form (see Appendix G) which was emailed. This information helped to identify any common, different, or overlapping features of the participants. Semi-structured interviews (see Appendix D) were conducted with each participant to gather information, such as years of experience, school size, impressions, suggestions, and other critical questions relevant to the research question on the topic being studied. Field notes were recorded after each interview to document any observations made during the interview by the study participant. Follow-up questions were utilized to clear up any areas that require clarification or need further elaboration.

The interviews were used to measure various aspects of being a MESC. The range of interview questions (see Appendix D) were used to capture a reliable and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Heppner & Wampold, 2015). The following questions were asked of each participant during the interview:

1. Please tell me about yourself.
2. What do you like to do in your free time?
3. What is your proudest accomplishment?

To assist in answering Research Question 1, What are your experiences as a male elementary school counselor, the following questions will be asked to the participants:

4. What is your overall perspective about males entering the field of education?
5. Were you encouraged to enter the field of education, specifically counseling?

6. Please describe your experiences working with families as a male elementary school counselor.
7. Please describe experiences working with teachers and administration.
8. Have you ever been told to do or not do something at your school because you were male?
9. What benefits or qualities do you feel you bring to the elementary level as a male school counselor?
10. What advice or suggestions would you give any male considering entering the counseling profession as an elementary counselor?
11. Did your high school or university suggest education and/or counseling as a career option?
12. Why do you believe there are so few male counselors at the elementary level?
13. What benefits as it relates to student's career choices and exploration do you feel you contribute as a MESC?

The Researcher's Role

The avoidance of prejudgments and close-mindedness must occur when conducting qualitative research. In phenomenological research, the concept of epoché is a term that Husserl defined as “free from suppositions” and in which “no position whatsoever is taken” (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 85-84). This term is a main tenant in transcendental phenomenology and is important to ensure transparency and eliminate any bias regarding the topic being studied (Moustakas, 1994). This type of research concentrates on the information given by the participant and makes no attempt to predict or control the population being studied (Morrell-Scott, 2018; Rebar et al., 2011). Morrell-Scott (2018) cited that qualitative research allows the ability to generalize the theoretical understanding of a phenomenon.

A self-appraisal to assess any bias that one may have in the field being studied is important to ensure trustworthiness and overcome any biases they may have about the issue being studied. For example, if a doctoral student pursuing a Doctor of Education degree in Community Care and Counseling at a Christian university. As such, it is important to be aware of traditional conservative views on the roles of males and females by some in the Christian faith. Furthermore, she is a former teacher of 16 years and has been employed as an elementary school counselor for more than 13 years. Consequently, she has a plethora of experiences and perceptions about the field of school counseling.

There are several steps that were taken to address bias during the study. Reflexive journals were utilized for self-exploration, and an expert panel evaluated study information and data generated as a result of this research (Finlay, 2002; Janesick, 1998; Morrell-Scott, 2018). Memoing, one bracketing approach, was also utilized to prevent any preconceived views or perspectives about the subject being evaluated from hindering the phenomenological study. This practice was conceived by Edmund Husserl, who was considered the founder of phenomenology, and used bracketing in research to avoid “preconceived biases or judgments” (Beech, 1999, p. 35). Bracketing was an essential approach used to avoid transferring any personal judgments regarding the occurrence.

Data Collection

The data collection process for this study was conducted using a qualitative study with a phenomenological approach. Data collection methods included questionnaires and semi-structured interviews during the research process. The data was used to evaluate the actual lived experiences of MESCs. Upon approval from Liberty University’s IRB, interviews were conducted with eligible participants after informed consent was given. Informed consent was obtained and signed using an electronic signature. Field notes were taken during the interview

and were utilized and evaluated as they related to the findings and overall themes generated via this study. The overlapping experiences that emerge as described by the participants was used to identify and group experiences into cohesive themes related to the lack of MESCs. These themes provided more comprehensive information related to the topic being studied.

The participants' identities were not used, and pseudonyms selected by them were used in place of their names to document their responses and other information. All data gathered was secured on a password-protected device to protect the information from unauthorized use (Shamoo & Resnik, 2022). The interviews were semi-structured. Questions that were asked during the interview were asked one-on-one and were in the form of open-ended questions. Open-ended questions allowed participants to answer questions fully without restrictions (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Web-based interviews using Zoom were used to conduct this study. This format provided convenience to those participants who might not be able to travel or physically meet for the interview due to scheduling conflicts. Web-based interviews provided the ability to see the participants during the interview process, which provided additional information, such as observing their mannerisms and facial expressions during the interview (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). All interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai. The transcription company signed a non-disclosure agreement to maintain the confidentiality of the research and participants. Finally, once all the data was transcribed, identifying reoccurring themes were found among the participants' responses and evaluated. Once all data had been utilized and included in the study and the dissertation process was complete, it will be permanently destroyed it using a shredding machine. Any electronic files will be permanently deleted to prevent any disclosure of the document's contents.

Interviews

A qualitative research interview is described as “attempts to understand the world from the subjects’ point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experience, to uncover their lived world” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 230). The lack of male elementary school counselors was examined through the participants' viewpoints in order to identify the themes and overall findings of this study. Interviewing participants was an appropriate strategy to use due to the interaction that occurs between the interviewer and the individual being interviewed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Semi-structured interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis with each participant in the study. Interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes each. Clarifying and elaborating probing questions were utilized to extract further details or clarify any information the participants give during the interview process (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The interviews consisted of 13 questions (see Appendix D).

As part of the interview protocol (see Appendix E), all questions were read verbatim to each participant so they would have the same meaning. After introductions, the first three questions were designed to develop rapport with the participant and help them feel comfortable responding to interview questions. The purpose of the study was explained, and the informed consent form was reviewed. Finally, interview questions four through 13 were read to each participant and clarifying questions were asked when needed and providing appropriate time for the participant to respond to each question. The interview ended with thanking the participants for their time in being a part of this study.

As stated above, questions one through three was asked to help build rapport with the participant. Questions four through five asked the participant to evaluate important considerations when choosing to become and remain a MESC. This set of questions were designed to gauge their overall views and perspectives about their job. Lewis-Jones (2012)

pointed out that many male educators like MESC's felt insufficiently prepared for their job roles, societal expectations, and the stereotypes often accompanying their position. Such considerations from MESC interview participants were examined using the last set of interview questions.

Questions numbered six through eight evaluated the potential challenges that many MESC's experience in their position. Edwards (2013) cited that many MESC's were also expected to be role models for the many students with absentee fathers. Likewise, McGrath and Sinclair (2013) echoed this sentiment regarding MESC's as role models. Other challenges were identified through question nine, which focused on the societal stigmas and stereotypes perpetuated on MESC's.

Questions 10 through 12 investigated what support systems are currently available to MESC's as current or former student counselors. Working alliances between teachers, administration, and the community with MESC's is integral to successfully meeting students' academic, social, and emotional needs (Perkins, 2013). These interview questions also reviewed the importance of partnerships between universities and school districts.

The final question, number 13, examined the perceived benefits of elementary students' career perspectives by having a male as a counselor. MESC's were asked to discuss how they believe their role as male educators' influences and shapes elementary children's early career perspectives. The beginning of each interview consisted of introductions and reviewing participants' rights to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. This process was done to ease any anxiety a participant might have about his participation in the study. Research participants were also reminded that their names would not be used in the study and that they would have the opportunity to review and approve the transcription accuracy from their interview. Confidentiality of each participant's interview and notes was also reviewed with the

research participants. Confidentiality and limited access of all interviews and documents were reiterated to study participants.

An expert panel was also utilized in this study. Such a panel can offer insightful perspectives on the research topic and aid in a deeper comprehension of the research question in the context of qualitative interviews. Using an expert panel helped to ensure the questions were pertinent, thorough, and reflected the most recent advancements in the subject (Atkinson, 2022). Also, constructive feedback from the expert panel on the interview questions and protocol also helped to increase the reliability and validity as an appropriate research tool of the study (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The expert panel was notified that each participant could end the research at any time and that no justification for this decision would be provided. In order to prevent the participants from being swayed in their engagement, the identities of the participants were not shared with the expert panel (Atkinson, 2022).

The communication to the proposed expert panel was sent after IRB approval. The expert panel consisted of reviews by a current Student Services Director and a retired school counselor. The panel was also asked to review the interview questions for alignment with the research question and clarity. In conclusion, an expert panel can be useful during the qualitative interview process. The panel members' experience, knowledge, and skills helped to ensure that the research findings were valid, reliable, and credible and allowed for a deeper understanding of the research topic.

Questionnaire

A demographic questionnaire was utilized to collect important information about potential research participants to ensure they met the specified criteria needed for study participation. Open-ended interview questions were another form of qualitative data used during this study's research. These types of questions allowed the participants to fully answer the

questions without restrictions or limits (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). There are various ways to evaluate the validity of questionnaires, including content validity, which involves making sure the questionnaire's questions are pertinent and thorough in relation to the research issue. It is crucial to carefully construct the questionnaire and allow an expert panel to review it to ensure reliability and validity in surveys and questionnaires (Sarıs & Gallhofer, 2014). Finally, it's critical to think about any biases in the responses and take action to reduce their influence on the reliability and validity of the information from the data collected (Presser, 2004). This can be achieved by asking open-ended questions and providing clear instructions throughout the study.

Data Analysis

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the perceptions and experiences of MESCs from school districts located in southeastern North Carolina to gain a phenomenological perspective of their experiences and perceived challenges as existing MESCs. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) cited several steps used in analyzing qualitative data, which included organizing and transcribing the data for analysis. Furthermore, data was explored by coding it, using the codes to gather a picture of all data through identification of themes, showing findings, interpreting the research data using tables, charts, figures, and validating findings using member checking and triangulation or multiple methods of data sources to ensure an overall understanding of this phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Using a multi-step process ensured that information gleaned in this research study was fully analyzed and evaluated the information gathered regarding this phenomenon. Using Otter.ai, a transcription service, allowed the research findings to be more accurately recorded and ensured optimal time with the participant during the interview process. Finally, peer review was utilized to evaluate the data and the analysis and findings provided.

Transcendental phenomenology was an appropriate methodology to use in this study. Upon completing all research interviews, transcripts were analyzed for each participant and then collectively for all research participants to identify ordinary and unexpected themes that might emerge from participant interviews. The use of a phenomenological study places more focus on the narrative being provided, which was used to provide succinct and detailed information on the findings of the data in this study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Prior to examining the findings, it was important to note that member checking was utilized so that each participant could verify the accuracy of each transcript produced from their interview. Research outcomes were reported using dialogue from interview transcripts and coding, which supported the explanations of ordinary and unexpected themes that were identified from research participants' feedback (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). These processes supported the data analysis and provided a more concise understanding of the phenomenon. Findings were presented in narrative form and a visual format to provide a clear representation of the data. These findings were synthesized in a coherent, written description based on the content of the interviews, themes, and literature regarding the experiences and perceptions of MESCs.

Trustworthiness

According to Polit and Beck (2014), trustworthiness in a study describes the level of confidence in the data, interpretation, and methods used to conduct the study and maintain a quality study. Furthermore, Connelly (2016) advised that trustworthiness is dependent upon four major criteria: "credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability" (p. 435). Trustworthiness is important to the integrity of the study, especially in a qualitative study. To increase the trustworthiness and credibility of this study, member checking and observation was utilized to further validate research findings (Heppner & Wampold, 2015). A key step in achieving confirmability is utilizing peer review by colleagues or peers in the studied field

(Connelly, 2016). The information provided from these interviews helped identify and understand existing MESC's perceptions regarding their career and identify the concerns and challenges that they believed hinder other male counselors from entering this level of school counseling.

Credibility

Credibility for this study was established using several approaches, such as coding the data, identifying various themes within the study, and ensuring the accuracy of the data from participants. "A qualitative study is considered credible if the descriptions of human experiences are immediately recognized by individuals that share the same experience" (Sandelowski, 1986, p. 89). Each participant was asked to review and confirm if the transcript from the interview was accurate and reflected what they had intended. The use of member checking helped to ensure that the transcription service has accurately transcribed the interview material. The use of triangulation was conducted using field notes, interviews with participants, and observations on the lack of MESC's (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This process helped to further enhance the credibility of this study. These data collection methods helped reduce threats, such as researcher bias to the issue of credibility, by strengthening the integrity of the study's phenomenological findings and reducing any issue that would have jeopardized the validity or accuracy of this research (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Dependability and Confirmability

When evaluating the dependability or reliability of the study for trustworthiness, extensive data collection and identification of themes was included in the detailed notes concerning the participants. Other elements of dependability that were utilized for this study also included peer debriefing to enhance the study's credibility. An audit trail documenting the research process and methods utilized during this study and a clear description of how data was

collected using questionnaires as instrumentation and purposive sampling was also leveraged (Nowell & Albrecht, 2019). Dependability in qualitative research means that the findings of the research should be able to be reproduced by another researcher (Shenton, 2004). Another criterion of trustworthiness examined in a qualitative study is confirmability (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). This criterion is important to minimize biases concerning the research being conducted and to ensure that the findings are reliable and as objective as possible.

The confirmability of a study should be corroborated or verified by another researcher. Threats to confirmability include researcher bias, interpretation bias, and sample bias. Minimization of bias were done by identifying the limitations of a study and researcher assumptions and by utilizing purposeful sampling, ensuring that specific criteria are used to select research participants (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The use of triangulation and member checking are also two effective techniques utilized to achieve confirmability and minimize any biases for this study (Carcary, 2020). Peer debriefing by colleagues and researchers will also help to prevent any researcher bias and enhance the credibility of the research study through this additional input. Using consistent procedures and methods during the data collection process of this study and an audit trail ensured the replicability of this research and further increased the confirmability of the overall study (Nowell & Albrecht, 2019).

Finally, various elements of confirmability were also addressed in this study. For example, coding was utilized to identify themes and manage data. Participant statements during the interview were used to support research claims and statements (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Self-reflection was utilized while conducting the research to acknowledge any bias or assumptions that may exist and to enhance transparency, validity, and accountability during the research process (Carcary, 2020; Nowell & Albrecht, 2019). The findings from this research can

be substantiated through study replication to measure consistency, member checking, triangulation, and peer review (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Transferability

The final criterion of trustworthiness is transferability. Transferability refers to applying the research to other areas or groups with similar characteristics (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). It is important that the research be valid and applicable to other settings, such as the school districts and universities mentioned in this study of MESCs (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that "in order to establish transferability is to create a thick description of the sending context so that someone in a potential receiving context may access the similarity between them" (p. 126). The results of this study can be applied to these organizations and provide important information that administrators can use to address this phenomenon. The use of accurate and concise reporting of methodology and research findings provide educational organizations with information that may be helpful for the recruitment and retention efforts of MESCs. Purposeful sampling was utilized to ensure that the participants selected for the study met the research objectives and eliminate any potential threats to transferability (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). In addition, several data collection methods, such as member checking, triangulation, and reflexivity, further mitigate any potential threat to transferability (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Nowell & Albrecht, 2019).

The goal of this research was to explore the experiences of male elementary school counselors (MESCs) and their perspectives as to what they believe contribute to the lack of MESCs at the primary level. Another aim of this study was that participants' perspectives, interviewer notes, and overall findings would help in future research in this under-researched topic. The findings of this study can apply to many areas related to MESCs. For example, findings from this research can be used in future research to examine the current recruitment and

retention gap regarding this population, both for universities and school systems alike. Finally, research findings from this study can also be used to study relationships between MESCs and male students' academic performance.

Ethical Considerations

Procedures implemented in this study were implemented to ensure that ethical standards, as they related to the participants and written research, was maintained during this research. The use and purpose of this research went through an approval process with the university IRB while also addressing the principles found in the Belmont Principles. This ensured that the study would not harm the participants.

The following steps were put in place to maintain IRB guidelines and adherence to the principles outlined in the Belmont Report. Pseudonyms were used for all research participants in order to protect privacy. Confidentiality was assured through the implementation of informed consent. Using pseudonyms and informed consent helped encourage participants to respond openly and honestly without fear of disclosure of interview content (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Additionally, member checking helped ensure that interviews were transcribed accurately and reflected what the participants intended to say. Participants were also informed that they can withdraw from the study without penalty (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Research findings and study information was stored electronically on a password-protected device with limited access. Paper materials were stored in a locked file cabinet to ensure confidentiality. Finally, the expert panel reviewed the research and interview question(s), to ensure the objectivity and suitability of the material for the research being conducted.

The risks in this study were minimal; however, there were a few that participants could have experienced during this study. Minor fatigue could have been an issue for participants during the interview process due to sitting for an extended time. Eye strain could have also been

an associated risk with this study from reading the material and completing the online questionnaire. Another risk could have been the emotional responses due to the sensitive nature of some of the material being discussed in the study.

Implications

There are two primary theoretical and practical implications of this study. The goal of using a qualitative phenomenological approach allowed the opportunity to hear firsthand accounts of the lived experiences of people who make up the situation being evaluated. Another goal of this research was to develop recommendations to guide future directions for further study of this issue. The outcome of the implications gained from the findings of this study was to determine possible guidelines and resources that have a positive difference in the lives of existing MESCs and encouraged other male school counselors to work at the elementary level. The data from this research was used to identify existing themes by describing the phenomenon provided by current MESCs (Strunk et al., 2015). This analysis took place through the repeated use of participant transcripts and interpretation of the data.

Limitations of Data

The study only focused on MESCs. There will be no additional input from individuals, such as college recruiters, university counseling programs, or school district personnel, concerning the lack of MESCs. Input concerning recruitment and retention solely came from the research participants. This lack of input could hinder the development of other reasons and considerations explaining the limited number of male school counselors working at the elementary level.

The study was done completely in the southeastern region of North Carolina. As a result, some of the perspectives shared by the participants may also be impacted by cultural or regional assumptions concerning male roles and responsibilities. The lack of a more diverse sample

represented in the study could impact the findings and overall themes that may develop during the review of the data generated from the participants. One final and important limitation of this study is having a small number of participants who meet the criteria for this study. A small sample size can limit the scope and overall impact of a study examining the need for more male school counselors in elementary schools. These limitations, however, may serve as a potential research area for future studies.

Summary

This chapter addressed the methodology used for this study on the lack of MESCs and their perspectives and experiences (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Implementing robust research procedures helped ensure the trustworthiness, and its four major criteria, credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of this study. Recruitment procedures were discussed, along with appropriate permissions granted from the university's IRB and school districts included in this study. The research question and interview questions for this study were also stated, and the procedures for the progression and implementation of the study was explained. Security measures to ensure confidentiality were also provided in this chapter. Such measures included password-protected electronically stored information for all interviews and documents and a locked and secure location for all physical research documents with identifying participant information. Data was collected while ensuring this phenomenological study's trustworthiness, authenticity, and accuracy criteria. The findings of this study in the next chapter provide further information and insights regarding the lack of MESCs and their perceptions and lived experiences.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the lived experiences of male elementary school counselors (MESCs). The first section of this chapter describes the participants in this study and the information gathered for screening purposes. Demographic surveys and data from semi-structured interviews in this section provided more detailed information on research participants. The study also provided information about the experiences and perspectives of MESCs and any associated impacts. Data for this study was collected using semi-structured interviews. Data collected from participant interviews was used to identify the themes and sub-themes derived from this study. This study was significant to understanding the lived experiences of men working as elementary school counselors. The findings of this study may influence the views regarding MESCs and bring awareness to the need to increase and better support this population. The second section focuses on the results of participant interviews and surveys, which identified themes that were developed from analyzing this information.

Participants

This section describes each individual who participated in the study. For anonymity, each participant selected a pseudonym, which was used throughout the research process, including data collection, data analysis, and findings from the study. Eligible study participants were males over the age of 18 years who worked as elementary school counselors for at least 2 years. All study participants worked in an elementary school in southeastern North Carolina in the United States. See Table 1 for a summary of demographic participant information.

Table 1*Demographic Participant Information*

Participant	Age in Years	Race	Years as a MESC	Prior School Counselor in Middle/Secondary levels
Paul	64	Native American	17.5	Yes - Both
John	51	Native American	11	Yes
Mark	47	African American	4	Yes
Luke	24	Caucasian	2	No
James	49	African American	10	Yes
Matthew	64	Caucasian	17	No
Antoine	48	African American	7	No
Bill	61	Caucasian	25	Yes
Isaiah	65	Caucasian	7	Yes

Paul

Paul was a 64-year-old Native American male. Paul worked in the school system since 1985. He began his career in education as a peer mediator for 3 years. Paul stated:

I decided to go to seminary school. And I was fortunate enough that when I started that summer, the first course that I had was under Dr. Hatcher, who had been a pastor and had gone back and got his doctorate in psychology. So, he had both backgrounds: counseling and ministry work. So, I took classes under him that summer and that fall, we were talking, and he advised me what I needed to do. He said you need to look at going into our counseling program.

Paul heeded his professor's guidance and registered for the counseling program at a local university, ultimately earning a degree as a school counselor. Paul was a school counselor for two schools, dividing his time between his county's middle and high schools. He worked at this level for 1 year before transitioning to an elementary school setting, where he had been a school counselor for 17 years. Paul was the only school counselor at this primary school.

John

John was a 51-year-old Native American male. He had been a school counselor for 12 years and had worked in education for 22 years. John began his career in education as an Exceptional Children's (EC) teacher at the high school level. He served in this capacity for 16 years and worked as an EC teacher at the high school level. John stated that he was inspired to become a school counselor because of the school counselor's impact on him as a student.

According to John:

I recall one day talking with my counselor. I was kind of going through some stuff that I didn't even realize was an issue. She really helped me get through it. So, I think that experience kind of planted a seed to think about counseling.

John opted to go to college to earn a counseling degree, using his military service educational benefits. After obtaining his school counseling degree, he taught at elementary, middle, and high school levels for several years before becoming an elementary school counselor at his present school. John noted that his previous role as an EC teacher complemented his school counselor abilities, due to his background in the education field.

Mark

Mark was a 47-year-old African American male. He had been an elementary school counselor for 4 years. Before working as an elementary school counselor, Mark worked at a high

school. Mark requested to leave high school and serve as a school counselor at an elementary level. He explained:

It was my choice because I knew we, my wife and I, were pregnant with a child, and I wanted to kind of, get a heads-up on you know, what it's going to be like. So, working in an elementary school kind of gave me a heads-up on what I needed to expect, you know, with our son. It has really helped me in a lot, in a lot of areas.

Mark believed that transitioning from working as a high school counselor to an elementary school counselor would provide him with more time to spend with his son and family, since high school counseling typically requires more of a time commitment. Mark mentioned that his experience as a parent and elementary school counselor had been mutually beneficial. His experience as a parent of a young child had enhanced his understanding of his students' needs, and working in an elementary setting improved his ability to connect with his son.

Luke

Luke was a 24-year-old White male and a relatively new counselor. Before becoming a school counselor, he graduated with a degree in sports administration. Luke started working with children coaching basketball during the summer and found that he had a talent for working with and relating to children when coaching sports. Luke's ability to inspire and support the students that he coached made him decide to pursue a degree in school counseling. He stated, "For anybody who has coached before, they know there's a lot of similarities between counseling and coaching. So, that's why I got into counseling." Luke was hired as an elementary school counselor after graduating college and had only worked at his present school since becoming a school counselor. He stated that his time working at an elementary school was a good experience and that his past work as a coach was beneficial when relating to students and getting them to talk with him about any concerns that they may be experiencing.

Matthew

Matthew was a 64-year-old White male. He was the only MESC in his entire school district. Matthew had been in education for over 30 years. He brought a great deal of knowledge to his current job as an elementary school counselor. Matthew maintained that his former life experiences, such as military service, boat builder, steel worker, teacher, college professor, and mental health specialist, provided him with usable, real-life knowledge that he used in his interactions with his students about careers and helped him to better relate to parents. Matthew felt that as a MESC, he could bring a different perspective to school topics and issues for both female and male students. He added that many students only had female teachers, especially in elementary schools. Therefore, students may only receive a female perspective regarding various topics and issues that may arise in an elementary school.

Matthew felt that his former role as a teacher was a real benefit when working with students and teachers concerning students' needs and concerns: "I think I had a big advantage with working with the teachers because I was a teacher for a number of years, before I became a school counselor." Finally, Matthew said that teachers at his school knew that he truly understood how challenging their job can be because of his experience as a teacher. He also explained his rationale for initially choosing to enter school counseling at the middle school level instead of elementary school:

When I started school counseling, I got into middle school because I felt like there was more scheduling issues in the high school level. I felt like middle school would be more opportunity for actual counseling to take place. When I left middle school and the chance came to go an elementary school, I realized that I should have pursued this level much sooner.

James

James was a 49-year-old African American male. He was also the only MESC in his school district. James worked as a school counselor for about a decade but worked at a Head Start program for several years before becoming a school counselor. James believed that as a MESC, he could overcome the unfavorable preconceptions faced by men in education through his presence and interactions with children, parents, and staff. He explained that individuals observed him daily in his position and came to understand that men are as equally competent when working with young children as women. James attributed his experience as a teacher at Head Start to be crucial in his transition to becoming a school counselor at the elementary level. James asserted that since many students at the elementary level lack a male presence in their lives, his interactions with his students provide another viewpoint:

Students may say maybe, "I don't have to go down a bad road, that there are some positive males I can look up to." Showing compassion to them [students], and being patient with them. They always get that nurturing from female teachers, so if a male is supportive and caring, students can understand that love and nurturing can come from males, too. This is so important, especially for those students that don't have a male figure in their lives.

James credited his success as a school counselor to his ability to work well with others, his positive outlook, and his ability to establish partnerships with his students' parents.

Antoine

Antoine was a 48-year-old African American male in his seventh year as a school counselor at the elementary school where he worked. Antoine served in the military for 20 years before becoming a school counselor. He had three sons who were also serving in the military. Antoine explained that his military and parental experiences could benefit students at the

elementary school level: “I have traveled all over the world, and I am able to share those experiences with my students, as well as all the different types of jobs that I have done.”

Antoine mentioned that he frequently worked more with male pupils than female pupils. He explained that teachers often asked him to speak with Black male students about their behavior and believed that he received such requests because he was Black. Antoine explained that he was willing to assist any student if it may benefit the child. Antoine mentioned that his experience dealing with his administration was positive. He attributed his strong support and positive experiences to the fact that both principals he worked under had previously been school counselors before becoming principals. He asserted that his superiors understood a school counselor’s appropriate duties and obligations, which enabled him to fulfill his duties effectively.

Bill

Bill was a 61-year-old White male. He had been a school counselor for 25 years. He served as a middle and high school counselor before working at the elementary level. He believed that being a male school counselor provided him with certain benefits while working with families. However, he acknowledged that sometimes his opinions or advice were disregarded or not completely embraced due to his gender. He contended that families were incredibly supportive of his work and daily encounters as a counselor. Bill, a seasoned counselor, believed that being a male in counseling was more challenging than often perceived. He described primary levels as highly fulfilling but acknowledged that some of the stories and circumstances that he encountered or addressed for a student’s well-being were emotionally challenging. Bill considered his daily work with students very rewarding. He stated that new male counselors entering the elementary level may not realize that they will encounter events at this level that may be upsetting, particularly when they must involve Child Protective Services:

You get to spend a lot of wonderful time with kids and help them out, and they will listen to you if you listen to them. And if you've made it to the point where a child can tell you something, like, then that's a good thing. You've done something, you've made a relationship. So yeah, that's good. So, now the work comes, and it's better because you were told.

Bill planned to continue working as an elementary school counselor until he retires.

Isaiah

Before becoming a school counselor, Isaiah, a 65-year-old White male, held positions as a teacher, coach, assistant principal, and principal. Isaiah felt that his 39 years of experience as an educator helped him become an effective elementary school counselor. Isaiah started his professional journey as a middle school counselor and later transitioned to working at the elementary level. Isaiah stated:

I didn't want to come into elementary education because I didn't feel like there would be any way that I could relate. I don't want to say I was afraid, but I just didn't want to get involved with elementary because I didn't think there'd be as much counseling as I could with middle school, but how wrong I was in my assessment of that. Because there is such a need of a male counselor at the elementary age.

Isaiah worked as a counselor for 20 years but had served as an elementary school counselor at his assigned school for 7 years, working with students in grades K–2.

Results

Data for this study was collected during the participant interviews. The information was then synthesized and grouped into themes. The themes derived from the interview process resulted from the overall experiences and perspectives of each participant in the study. The

interview transcripts were analyzed in the study to identify commonalities of the experiences shared by participants. Research question responses focused on the data and information collected during semi-structured interviews of each participant. The information gathered from interview transcripts was used to answer the research question that guided this study.

Theme Development

The development of themes emerged from data analysis from survey and interview transcripts. The topic development process was initiated by responding to the research question utilized in the semi-structured participant interviews and finishing the screening survey. Prior assumptions were put aside to gain the most insight into the participants' experiences from a new angle (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Several stages of development occurred before common themes were identified from the data gathered from the participants during the data collection process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Memoing was used to identify relevant findings or points discovered when reading the transcripts from online interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Next, Delve coding software was used to organize the data from participant transcripts. The software then identified common snippets of information in most participant interview transcripts. Recurring information was then recorded from participant transcripts and identified each interview transcript's pertinent terms, phrases, and sentences.

Appendix H shows a set of codes and snippets synthesized from the interview data. The interview transcripts of the participants were reviewed, and common themes that existed were documented, as well as other important information from the interviews. Commonalities were grouped and identified among participant transcripts under a code. Codes were then analyzed and refined to identify concrete themes and sub-themes from participant interviews. The topic development procedure was concluded when there were no further themes that emerged. Table 2 shows the themes and sub-themes that were identified.

Table 2*Themes and Sub-themes*

Themes	Sub-themes
A. Role Models	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Career Influence 2. Father Figures 3. Families
B. Challenges	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Non-counseling Duties 2. Stereotypes 3. Lack of Recruitment
C. Beliefs	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Perceptions and Influences of Life Experiences 2. Suggestions for New MESC

Role Models

This theme described the many hats that some MESC have been expected to wear because of their presence as a male counselor in an elementary setting. All participants stated that they felt that they had served as role models in some form or facet as MESC. As males in a female-dominated career field, guidance and input from such a limited segment of the educational and elementary setting gave rise to numerous calls for MESC intervention.

Six participants addressed the vital part that they played in serving as role models to the students that they served. Each MESC that spoke to this theme acknowledged that being a positive role model was something that others in their school and community expected them to provide as males. For example, Luke stated, "I do think males have a distinct opportunity, when they go into education to help students that maybe doesn't have a male figure that is always there for them." John shared the same sentiment as Luke regarding being a male role model for the students he served: "I feel like I add to a void that a lot of kids might have who don't have a positive male role model that doesn't judge them." Paul similarly stated that, as a MESC, he enjoyed "helping them [students] to feel at ease knowing that there is a male that they can go and

discuss something with” if they need to talk. James and Matthew reflected that the boys with behavioral challenges often seemed to need their help more, as James stated, in “helping them to understand the dynamics of relationships” with others. Isaiah reiterated what the other five MESC’s said regarding this issue, as many students that he encountered daily “don’t have a positive male role model that they can look up to.” He went on to say that there was undoubtedly a need for more MESC’s for these reasons. This theme contained three sub-themes: career influence, father figures, and families.

Career Influence. Eight participants reported feeling that they added an essential dimension to elementary schools by fulfilling a nontraditional career as a MESC. James explained:

I think that being an elementary school counselor, when it comes down to careers, that kind of broaden their perspective about gender roles. And on a professional level even talking to younger children, some of them already are culturally conditioned to think, “Oh, that’s a job for a woman, that’s a job for a man,” and when they are allowed to see a male figure in this position, it really challenges that cultural conditioning. It really gives them a different perspective of careers, and even with my female students, you know, I think that it helps them to realize that “I can do whatever I set my mind to, and I’m not limited.” I think that one of the biggest benefits as a MESC is crushing that mindset.

Paul described, “I hope my presence will help students to see especially the males that men can be in education as something other than administrators or coaches, and it’s not just for the females.” Luke echoed Paul’s sentiment:

So, I think students, especially male students, seeing me in this role would make them feel more comfortable not only to go into education, but maybe a setting or career that’s different from what the majority of males go into. So, I hope that I am a living example

of maybe how males don't have to be stuck in certain careers that they are expected to go into.

As a male who became an elementary school counselor later in his life, Antoine added that he has had the opportunity to have multiple careers: "So, I'm Black and a MESC, which is already different for many students, and I have served in the military and have that experience to offer, plus I provide a different perspective that most of their female educators." Mark believed that because he was in the students "environment every day, it will give them some thought to the possibility that they might be able to do something similar if not on the same career path."

Father Figures. Six participants commented on the fact that MESC's often serve as surrogate fathers for those children whose fathers are deceased, not present in the home, or incarcerated. Antoine recalled one mother's request: "Can you talk to my son? He just needs a positive male figure in his life." Antoine elaborated, "I think there is an expectation that males can fix other males, especially when it comes to discipline [behavior]." Paul, a veteran MESC, had a similar view of his often-expected role as a father figure for those students without one:

We live in a day and time where there are so many kids that don't have a male in the home. Don't have a father figure in the home. And so male educators, of course, they can't be the father. But they can at least show especially our boys how to walk, carry themselves, and be a person of integrity, not a person that's out trying to make a hustle or live the thug life, you know, but be a person that's respected and a person that is looked up to. I never had a male teacher until I was in the sixth grade. And it made a big impact because, you know, just the way he carried himself. I think males are very, very needful in elementary and not just in administration. I have some mothers say, "Well, I'm having to be the father and a mother." You can't wear both those hats. You can work at it, but

you can't do it; they are just things that only the male can do. Just like there are things that only the female can do.

Isaiah discussed the significance of his role and the lack of fathers in homes, saying, "Now there is so many families that are either split up or there is no male at all, and mom is playing two roles." Similarly, Mark stated:

I have found that there has been a lack of fathers and males in the home. So, for our families who are single parents and no male support, I think my presence as a male counselor has been a benefit.

Bill pointed out that for most boys in a home without the father's presence, "They could go all day especially in elementary without seeing a guy." He added, "So, I try to present myself as, you know, this is the right way that a guy should act." Isaiah also stated regarding father figures, "I'd like to think that I am meeting some need for them, rather it is a father or a grandfather figure. I think they feel at ease with me and that I'm accessible to them." Finally, John stressed that when he deals with families, he makes it a point to thank the dads and encourages them to keep coming out. He stated, "I wish we had more fathers that were involved with their kids than we do" at the school level.

Families. Family interactions can influence a student's success and potential. Mark stated, "You tend to operate in other capacities because you happen to be male, parents will tap into that and ask for certain things to help their children." Bill told his parents that although he is older, "I have two adult children who were once elementary age, so I've been through this stage." He felt that it helps parents know that he can relate to the challenges of raising elementary-age children. Bill added that he thinks because he was a male, "It's maybe given me some credibility that I wouldn't have otherwise, not that that is right or fair, but some may think, if he's a guy, then he must know what he's talking about." Mark interacted with families of

elementary students on the basis that he understood their expectations and any concerns that they may have had about their children:

Because I have a young child, my approach is totally different. I'm able to see and understand the perspective of parents, too. And so, I think because I have that experience, that I am able not to just listen to what they're saying and make a decision, but I really hear what they're saying and understand it from a different place because I have a lot of those same similarities and situations in my own personal life as a parent. I think the bigger surprise to families is when you know a male is calling them or when you walk into the room for a meeting, and you enter instead of a female. So, sometimes you'll see that look of surprise on their face when you show up, and it's not what they are expecting. But I think that the biggest surprise for families that they know a male is here and has a direct impact on their child.

Matthew had this view about interacting with students' families:

If you communicate with the parents, that's half the battle because you get them on your side, and then you know that you can work with them. I think it's important to put parents at ease and get them to trust me to help their child. We're working together on this, you know, and so I always do my best to make them feel comfortable and get to know them. I tend to relate well with people, I think, and my view has always been I'm on the same team as the parents.

Antoine talked about his interactions with families:

The encounters of parents are there. They are almost all positive. I have parents who also really want their child to be around as many Black educators as possible in the school system. You know, so some parents are glad their kid has a Black school counselor. And

I'm just like, just because I'm Black doesn't mean I'm better. I do think it helps with some parents being a male.

James explained:

Every family has their own dynamics, and it's unique. I have found that the strength of your relationship with the student will kind of determine the strength of your relationship with the family. If I can gain a family's trust, and they understand where I'm coming from, that I'm here as a partner and not a dictator. I'm not trying to tell you what to do with your child or how to raise your child, but that we both have the same common interests in helping their child be successful.

Each participant in the study stressed the importance of positive interactions with the families of the children that they served as MESCs.

MESC Challenges

This theme described the many challenges and feelings that participants experienced or had to prepare for as MESCs. Participants pointed out some of their struggles and the reluctance of other male educators to work at the elementary level. Bill stated that working at the elementary level "is out of the comfort zone of a lot of people." Whereas John stipulated, "I think there is a natural fear for guys to be like, their [students are] small, 'I'll work with older students.'" Isaiah questioned whether he "could be around and work with kindergarten students all day," before becoming a MESC. John and Isaiah expressed that those worries gradually faded as they became more experienced in their responsibilities as MESCs. Luke stated:

There is this perception that with a male, especially a young male [MESC], that maybe that person isn't going to be as caring as a female counselor would be. There's a feeling that females are more empathetic and caring than males. So, I do feel like maybe other people might have that feeling about MESCs. Also, based on the perception of okay,

well, this is a feelings-based career. Males are supposed to go into business or supposed to go into working with their hands.

Perceptions like the one Luke shared can create barriers and challenges that make it hard for MESC's to be effective at their school. Antoine stated that he was often mistaken for the "custodian, principal, or [physical education] PE teacher" and that people are surprised when he says that he is a MESC. He elaborated that he was in a much smaller minority because he was an African American MESC. The three subthemes developed from this theme were the issues of the assignment of non-counseling duties to MESC's, stereotypes, and lack of recruitment, which further challenged MESC's efforts.

Non-counseling Duties. Eight of the nine participants provided examples of times and situations where they performed a service or activity that was outside the scope of their job duties and responsibilities as a professional school counselor. Only one participant stated that his principals did not ask him to perform duties outside of his defined role as a counselor. Antoine said, "Both of the principals that I have worked for have been school counselors before, so I have a great relationship with both of them because they understand my role." This theme also examined the influence of teachers and their relationships and interactions with MESC's. Part of the interactions for the participants also included ensuring that teachers know the proper role of the elementary school counselor, regardless of gender. Participants agreed that having positive interactions and alliances with these essential groups had been instrumental in their success as MESC's.

While staying within the parameters of defined and legitimate job duties should be the norm, this was not the case for eight of the nine participants. Luke stated, "Sometimes I feel like a little bit of the discipline responsibility is put on me to do because I'm a male." James explained, "Me and the PE teacher [who is also male], check in and release the buses each day,

and if there is an issue on the bus, then I have to go ahead and handle it right then and there.”

Regarding requests to help with discipline issues, which was not a defined role or responsibility for counselors, Matthew described:

I have been utilized in certain ways because I was a male counselor. For example, restraining kids because you know I'm stronger than the females. But then, at one point, you know, the principal asked me, “Well, how long do you think I should suspend them for?” I told them “Well, that's your role.” I know if I had gone along with that, she would have had me start filling the suspension forms out and everything else because she, she had a lot to do, and she felt overwhelmed, but you got to know when to draw the line, you know, and it's clearly not my role to handle that stuff.

Paul stated that his principal asked him to perform various activities and duties that were not included in his school counselor's job description:

Since I had a female principal and assistant principal, they would call me and asked me to be present in the office when they were talking to parents, especially the male parent, if they thought there was going to be a problem.

Paul also shared that other support staff made non-counseling requests because he was a male. Such requests included conducting annual health and development education sessions for the upper elementary students:

The nurses would be there every year, and when it came time to talk to the students at the end of the school year about their bodies changing and stuff, they always wanted me to do the session for the boys, and they would do the one for the girls. They would say, “You talk to the boys; we don't want to have to talk to them,” and I'd bring them into the library, and show the video, and do the session.

John cited that his principal called him to deal with angry parents. He said, “The secretary will call my office and say we have an angry parent we need you to come out there and deal with.” John continued, “We have a very capable assistant principal and principal,” but he regularly asked him to handle such matters. Likewise, Bill stated that he also felt that he was “looked upon as like a disciplinarian,” and said, “That is exactly not me.” However, he also cited other discrepancies that MESCs could encounter:

I used to, when I was younger, get asked to carry stuff all the time. Like, “Could you go get these computers?” And other stuff like that. I’m not asking you to bake cookies, which is equally, exactly, you know, inappropriate. They [administration] need to use the school counselors as counselors.

All participants responded to the question of their interactions with the administrator at the school. For many of the participants, they shared challenges that many have faced with their administrator, due to being asked to perform duties outside of their role. Antoine stated, “I have only had former school counselors as principals, so I’ve had great relationships with both of them.” Similarly, Paul described, “I have been fortunate to where I have always had a good relationship with my principals. They weren’t intimidated by having to deal with a male.” James shared: “Some expectation of males was ridiculous, and some stuff didn’t make sense.” Isaiah explained:

The last principal was female. I think we had some communication issues. I think with her, I didn’t understand some things that she did. And so, when I would question or ask her questions about something because I just wanted to understand why something was going on, she took it personal. This is my perspective of it. She either took it personal or that I was questioning her authority, which was not the case at all. I just wanted to understand why a decision was made the way it was.

Finally, Mark said, “The administration told me they wanted a male presence to be visible in certain locations like in the morning for car drop offs and during after school dismissals.” Matthew provided his insight as to what he thought helped to encourage positive administrative interactions with MESC:

I’ve really had good rapport, good relationships with the principals that I have worked with. And one of the things that helps me is that I try to communicate with them what my role is as a school counselor. I used the principal agreement form to establish an agreement with my principal about my role as a school counselor.

Most teachers have a good relationship with the MESC, according to the study participants; however, some teachers lean on them to help regulate students’ behaviors. Participants stated that it was important to stay within their proper role and not handle or assist with discipline for teachers. James stated, “Some want to complain, and as a male, I had to learn that sometimes what they really wanted is someone to listen, don’t offer suggestions, but just listen.” Mark explained how teachers were receptive to his presence each day:

Teachers have expressed to me that they appreciate you know, just my walking through in the morning and letting them [students] see my face. And they’ve shared that they have seen improvement in behavior just with how the child will respond to me as a male presence that comes into their classroom, and I’ve seen the same as well.

Matthew also explained that knowing your boundaries is important when interacting with teachers. For instance, he stated, “In those situations, where teachers ask me to do something that really wasn’t in my role. I let them know. And then I give them some suggestions of how they can handle it themselves.” Furthermore, Matthew stated that he had another attribute that helped when interacting with teachers:

Another advantage that I have is that I was a teacher before becoming a counselor. Being a teacher helps you to understand teaching and what the teachers are going through. Of course, you know, you can relate to them, because you have worked that job, and walked in their shoes, even though their shoes are getting harder and harder every year.

Stereotypes. All nine participants believed that even in today's modern and progressive society, when it comes to males, traditional stereotypes still hold firm. All participants cited the necessity of providing or putting extra layers of caution in place for MESC's because of those stereotypes. Antoine spoke concerning the fear that he and many other MESC's have regarding unfounded accusations and the stigmas that he has personally experienced as a MESC:

I understand that sometimes being a male school counselor, especially at the elementary school, comes with certain things. I think sometimes people may assume that you know, if he's a male, he's there, and he may be a pervert or like little kids. I kind of walk around with that mindset knowing that, so I'm very particular about how I handle children.

Before, where I was careful when I'm with a little girl; nowadays, I'm careful with every student, boy and girl, you know, because I never want a parent to think that something is what it's not. So, I think just me being a male in elementary kind of comes with that perception or stereotypes.

Antoine further provided an example of an incident when a parent expressed his displeasure about him working with his daughter because he was a male:

There was a parent who did not like me, and the only reason he didn't like me was because I was a male. He told me he didn't like male teachers, and he told me, "I don't like you being around my daughter, and I don't like you working here." But I worked here, I'm the school counselor, and Black school counselors are even more rare. I just told him okay; however, sir, I am still going to be here. And if your daughter needs me,

unless you say I can't speak to her, then I have to do my job. But I never had to talk to her or anything.

Mark stated that as a "hands-on person," he makes sure that when he comes into physical contact with students, it is in a "neutral way that is calming and affirming like with a fist bump or a high five." He stated, "I am six foot, six inches [tall], and the kids love that because it is a challenge to get up to my hand." Bill also explained the precautions he takes in his role as a MESC:

I was always cognizant of the fact that I was an older male, and these were young girls, when I talked to them, I would leave the door open. You just don't do anything that would even look suspicious. Sometimes even if you're totally above board, allegations have a way of sticking, so you just leave that door open.

Mark, James, and John stated that they often bring a female in, such as the school social worker, when working with female students as a precautionary measure. John noted differences between MESC's and their female counterparts:

Sometimes, you'll see female teachers, you know, if the boys are cutting up in the bathroom, they'll step right in there, and say, "Hey, what are you guys doing? Hurry up, and let's get out." But as a guy, I have no idea what the girl's bathroom looks like. I'm like they [female teachers] can get away with doing that, but I couldn't.

Luke and Antoine cited various challenges and stereotypes that MESC's experience. Luke stated, "The perception is this is a feelings-based career and that males are supposed to go into business, or you know work with their hands in careers like that." Antoine spoke about society's expectation that MESC's are better equipped to work with male students than females:

A lot of times, they think because I'm a male, that I can fix some of our little boys. You know, and I will say that just being honest, in many cases, it [is] the Black boys, you know, because I am a Black man.

Hegemonic expectations have also continued to give rise to the stereotypes that many MESCs have encountered. Most participants conveyed that although they lived in a modern era, societal norms and traditional role beliefs existed between classes and sexes. The education field is still primarily considered a female-dominated occupation. Men who work in the educational field sometimes face societal disapproval because they chose to work in the elementary educational field. James agreed, "I think that sometimes people in society are conditioned to think that certain jobs belong to females and certain jobs are for males. I think it goes back to the view that females are naturally caring." James continued, "Of course, you know, where we live, everyone has their own ideology of you know, what's a male role and what's a female role." Luke shared his opinion regarding this issue: "I think there's a perception that there are certain areas for men like working with your hands and that counseling is more suited for females based on what people have been told throughout time." Antoine provided an example of a typical interchange between him and school visitors:

In the past, people would walk into the building, people are shocked because they thought that I was the custodian or the PE teacher. I told them I'm the counselor, not the PE teacher. You hear like, "Oh okay," they'll be like, "Oh, I never seen a man school counselor before." And I think they're kind of searching for words to say because it wasn't expected.

Isaiah shared, "As males, we tend to be looked upon as the main provider of our families. And you know, it's hard to sometimes do that on a counselor's salary, be the breadwinner of the family." Bill and Isaiah agreed that traditional attitudes about men in education still exist. For example, Bill explained, "I could go through my day as an elementary counselor and never see another guy except for the custodian and gym teacher or maybe sometimes the administrator. Isaiah stated, "There's been times I've been the only [adult] male in the building of 1,000 kids."

Finally, John concluded, “People generalize teachers, and everybody else, you know maybe other than bus driver, as female.”

Lack of Recruitment. Most participants said that there were no recommendations or recruitment efforts for school counselors during their time in high school or college. However, two participants stated that they received advice about pursuing a career in the counseling field. Luke noted that his advisor had suggested pursuing a career in education. Paul stated that when he started college, a professor advised him to consider majoring in counseling if he was interested in helping others.

Men currently comprised approximately 25% of the school counselor population, and the percentage of men who become elementary school counselors is even smaller (Elementary School Counselor, 2021). Over half of the participants explained why a small percentage of males become MESCs. Matthew stated, “I think it’s the same reason that there’s so few teachers that are male at the elementary level, it’s the pay.” Isaiah also stated that inadequate compensation contributed to so few men entering counseling at the elementary level: “Men are usually the breadwinners, and so they worry about how they can provide for their family as a school counselor.” Isaiah also stated that many men who start as MESCs have the mindset, “I’ll get in and then move up to administration, so I’ll make more [money].” Bill said, “It is out of the comfort zone of a lot of people. I mean, I talked with my high school counselors, the guys, they don’t want to go work in elementary.” James stated similar thoughts concerning this issue: “I don’t know if you know, sometimes, as a male, sometimes, we prefer to deal with older children... I guess the maturity level of the children have something to do with it.”

Paul expressed his view regarding the lack of recruitment of more MESCs: “I think the decision to place counselors at this level comes from central [district] office, because counselors don’t get to really pick which level they are assigned.” Bill explained, “In my high school, we

didn't do things back then the way we do now and actually sit down and talk to kids. So, I headed to the university for other things." Like Paul, John stated, "Maybe central office decides to take a guy that is going into counseling and put him in high school where he can help coach." He also stated, "I think central office tends to recruit some of the males that are in the counseling field to become principals and fill other administrative positions." Mark stated that the "field of education doesn't pay a lot in comparison to some blue-collar jobs, so I think sometimes you have to look at the numbers when thinking about going into the field." Thus, elementary schools need better recruitment efforts to gain and retain more MESCs.

Beliefs of MESCs

All nine participants shared their beliefs about aspects relevant and impactful to them as male school counselors and their place at the elementary level. They shared personal life experiences that they felt they could share with their students as MESCs. Two sub-themes were represented under this theme: perceptions and the influence of life experiences and suggestions for other MESCs.

Perceptions and the Influence of Life Experiences. Antoine stated that his beliefs and experiences helped him to decide to become a MESC:

I think I bring life experiences like being in the military, living in different states and countries, and living and working amongst so many different types of people. I've learned a lot about life doing 20 years in the military. I became a school counselor at 41, and I had already retired [from the military]. So, I think that experiences, and like I said with the military, and being a father for so long has helped me bring a different perspective as a man than a female. Not to say that either perspective is more right, but that they just may be different.

James said:

Being a counselor on the elementary level, you get to plant the seeds that help the children grow. Sometimes you don't get to see them come to fruition until they get to high school, but you know that you planted that seed.

Bill revealed:

I had really good experiences with teachers personally when I went through the school system, so I thought that maybe I could give that to somebody else. I've kind of done it all in the sense as far as education wise so I have a variety of perspective and life experiences to offer.

Luke noted:

The reason that I love counseling, I think, you know, a lot of the patterns that students have and become such a big problem in middle school and high school is because early intervention wasn't there. I think being an elementary school counselor, you know, I can help early on and maybe stop some of those patterns from getting worse. That's why I got into counseling, I was trying to find a career where I can work with kids and guide kids, and I felt like this career was the perfect opportunity.

Mark responded:

I think it's an important field to enter as a male. I think we have a greater impact than any of us realize that we can offer to the environment or the role of school counseling. And, of course, we are a minority in this field. By being a male, you're able to address some things with male students that only a male can address in a way where it's not embarrassing to that student, but they're able to receive it better because there's another male sharing some insight that they'll be better for. Also, I have the benefit of having a principal and assistant principal who happened to be both female. I think by me being in

the room, I have an opportunity to contribute something to the conversation that from a male perspective, may not have been considered. I've heard other counselors say, "I need to get out of elementary. I have kids at home and I'm coming here dealing with small kids. I need something totally different." But I've enjoyed it; I don't regret the decision I made [to become an elementary school counselor].

Matthew shared:

I am able to bring a different perspective, especially at the elementary level, where they're with women all the time. They need the male perspective as well, both boys and girls. I think it's good to have a male there, too. I can talk with them about my life experiences of what it was like in the military and the steel factory, so they know that I am a real person, and it's just not all academic, and that they can succeed.

Paul stated:

I think that with our administration being female and the vast majority of teachers being female, that sometimes I have been able to maybe better relate to the male [students] and talk to them. Also, if the teacher didn't feel comfortable talking to a boy about whatever the situation was, I have been able to come in and relate and talk to him and help out in that situation.

Suggestions for New MESCs. All participants were asked to provide recommendations that they believed could benefit and support other males contemplating a career in counseling at the elementary level. Paul said, "Find a male or someone that's an experienced counselor that you can have as a 'go-to' person, not only for advice but on how to do things." Luke stated:

I would say keep going. It will be a different environment and a learning experience. Some days may feel like maybe you don't have somebody that you can talk to. Listen to your staff, but definitely put your own stamp on it as a male counselor. Just make it your

own. Don't feel like you have to be exactly like a female counselor might be or do things.

Go in with your own personality.

James shared his advice: "If you are a male that is very emotional and you're very compassionate, then be that person. Take your school counselor program, and let it reflect who you are." Antoine advised prospective MESCs to "do their research and learn more about the job before getting into it. And then when you get in, have fun, and enjoy it." Matthew offered that "the most important thing of all is the relationship you have with the kids, parents, faculty and with your administrators. You have to foster that positive relationship with all of them." Bill noted:

It's a great profession. You get to spend a lot of wonderful time with kids and help them out, and they will listen to you if you listen to them. So, I would say just to understand that you're in a special position, and you have a lot of impact. So, just know that when you go into it, that you're going to hear things that make you upset [neglect, abuse], and that's okay because these things need to be heard. Because somebody needs to take care of them. And if you've made it to the point to where a child can tell you something like that, that's a good thing, you done something, you've made a relationship.

Isaiah said, "Remember it's all about the kids. It's not about you." John replied:

It's really important to network and build that capacity with other elementary school counselors. Know what resources you have. Don't be afraid to reach out to other folks and get different perspectives. I think that one of the key things is [to] utilize the network that you've got.

Research Question Responses

This section addresses the research question that guided this study and aided in the development of the themes and sub-themes that were generated through the data analysis of

this topic. The research question that guided this phenomenological study was: “What are your experiences as a male elementary school counselor?”

Research Question

The research question for this study asked, “What are your experiences as a male elementary school counselor?” The themes discovered were role model, challenges, and beliefs, which provided a detailed and phenomenological description and understanding of the experiences of MESCs. Dominant sub-themes were also identified within each theme.

The theme of role models had three sub-themes: father figures, career influence and families. Study participants expressed that while serving as MESCs, they unintentionally become a father figure to students because they are more accessible and fill a void for their students. Participants reported that mothers, teachers, and even administrators’ pressure or encourage MESCs to serve as a father figure for students. Furthermore, MESCs explained that most students, without a positive male role model at home, often spend most of their time with females. The MESC participants felt that they could contribute something positive to these students’ lives through their guidance and example that they set before them each day at school. Participants also provided insightful and relational advice to male students who struggled to behave and act appropriately due to the absence of a father in the home. All participants stressed the need for students to be able to see males in a more positive light and realize that this role was one of the many that they have placed on them as elementary school counselors.

As role models for many of the students that they encountered, participants felt that they could directly impact and influence the students’ future career choices and ideas at their schools. Many cited that prior work experience before entering school counseling, such as the military and industry, allowed them to share firsthand knowledge and serve as a role model of

such careers. Participants stated that this influence was especially notable in the education career field, which has been predominantly female.

Families were the third sub-theme of role models. Participants concurred that changing the mindset of some parents was important for positive interactions. They cited the past negative experiences that some families may have encountered either as a student themselves or the parent of another child, which may have made them skeptical that positive partnerships with the school or counselor could exist. The MESC's stressed the importance of relationship building with families, helping families realize that they are welcome and have a voice. Some families may be unsure of the MESC's approach and interactions with them or how it may differ from a female counselor's approach, so communicating with families to manage their expectations was also essential. Additionally, it ensured families that MESC's want to work with them to achieve a common goal and shared purpose based on those collaborative efforts. Participants shared that the key to successful family interactions was to get to know the families of the children that they serve, make them comfortable, and create a collaborative team. Finally, according to some participants, effective education and communication of the counselor's role helped to solidify and enhance positive family interactions.

The theme of challenges identified the non-counseling duties that many MESC's encounter daily during their job performance. Non-counseling duties (i.e., those not listed as part of a school counselor's job and responsibilities) were also a significant challenge for the study participants. Study participants reported that the challenges varied from well-out to slightly-out of their role and responsibility as a MESC. Several participants shared that some administrators asked them to perform manual duties, such as mopping, sweeping, or lifting heavy items, because they were male. While most participants were okay with some of these requests, others pointed out that administrators did not request their female colleagues to perform similar tasks.

Some participants expressed frustration that many teachers and administrators also thought MESC's should participate in disciplinary discussions simply because of their gender. Requests made included managing buses, completing paperwork, and even being asked to suggest an appropriate number of days for suspensions for students who had violated school rules. Many MESC's explained that their involvement in disciplinary discussions would only hinder their ability to work with students and build positive relationships with them. Additionally, the MESC's disclosed that disciplinary consequences were not within the scope of their jobs as school counselors. Still, all but one of the participants maintained that teachers and administrators regularly ask MESC's to handle various student disciplinary issues.

Participants agreed that their interaction with students was a foundational component of the counseling profession and helped determine their program's success. Some MESC's pointed out that this process may look a little different due to stakeholders' views and roles of males in the elementary setting. However, each participant felt that administrative and teacher relationships were also significant, due to the impact that such interactions had on the role and success of MESC's. Furthermore, administrative and teacher support helped promote the goals of the counseling program and enabled the MESC's to reach and impact students positively. Many participants considered open dialogue and communication to be the best and most effective way to gain buy-in and support from these two stakeholders. Overall, participants credited the positive interactions of these groups as an essential ingredient to their work's success with the students that they serve.

The theme of challenges also reflected stereotypes that originated from the hegemonic expectations experienced by each participant. These traditional expectations or patriarchal views attempt to limit the roles of women and marginalize men who choose occupations, such as education or other jobs, viewed as less prestigious. Many of the MESC's said that they were often

mistaken for an administrator or as the PE teacher. Most participants explained that people frequently associate counseling with feelings and emotions and do not consider men typically as suitable for elementary counseling positions because of their bias. For example, James stated that initially, he was “reluctant to ask for help for fear of being seen as not a good fit for elementary [school].”

In addition, each participant expressed the difficulty of working as a man in elementary schools, sometimes experiencing stereotypical assumptions and various stigmas associated with males who work with young children. All participants discussed the precautions that they practiced to avoid hints of impropriety or allegations of inappropriate conduct toward a child. Some even described the common unfounded assumptions that men working in an elementary school only do so to prey on innocent children. Participants recognized the double standard and treatment of men and women in the elementary school environment. However, the MESC's acknowledged that biases exist, and they proactively worked to overcome common misconceptions by successfully performing their job each day.

The last sub-theme of the theme challenges was the lack of recruitment interactions that detailed the MESC's involvement with relevant groups vital to students' success. This theme reflected possible explanations from a phenomenological perspective by participants of why this population was so low. During some interviews, participants disclosed that some MESC's hold that position only briefly before moving into an administrative position, such as assistant principal or at the district office. Poor compensation continued to be a primary barrier to recruiting and retaining MESC's, according to participants who felt that salaries needed to be higher.

All participants in the study stated that there was a lack of recruitment efforts in the educational career field for men, especially in areas, such as elementary school counseling.

Each participant stated that, overall, there was no effort at the high school or college level to recruit males to the counseling field. Participants felt that this career awareness and recruitment for men in counseling at the elementary level was needed to have a more-balanced representation of elementary counseling.

The theme of beliefs encompassed the ideas and views that some of the participants had about their work as a MESC. Every participant shared the sentiment that more MESCOs were needed, and high school and college advisors should make a greater effort to encourage males to enter the field of school counseling and education in general. This theme gave rise to two sub-themes: perceptions and life experiences of MESCOs and suggestions to new male school counselors who enter at the elementary level. The value of looking at a situation or a solution through a male lens versus a female was a view that participants felt was critical to provide. The conclusion was that each position was simply a distinct perspective for analyzing or handling a situation, with no one view being superior.

Participants echoed the sentiment of the importance of early intervention during elementary school and their role and benefits as MESCOs in helping to reduce negative student behaviors and promote academic success. They all asserted that having a positive male advocate at the elementary level could motivate and positively support those students who did not have such an advocate. Participants expressed a willingness and eagerness to share suggestions with new MESCOs or males considering entering the counseling field at the elementary level. Participants provided several overall suggestions for individuals considering a position as a MESCO. Those suggestions included making your counseling program your own, building relationships, networking with other counselors even if they are not male, and advocating for your role as a counselor, emphasizing the importance of staying within the parameters of those roles, regardless of gender.

Summary

This chapter discussed the research findings and related the experiences and perspectives of MESCs. Nine MESCs participated in this study. Responses were obtained from participants during individual interviews using open-ended, semi-structured interview questions. Upon analyzing the data, three themes and eight sub-themes were identified. The participants' responses were outlined to the research question in this chapter. The participants answered the research question through the identified themes of role models, challenges, and beliefs.

The next chapter will provide an overview of the entire research study. It will outline responses to the research question that guided this study. Additionally, the chapter will present a summary of the research findings generated from the study, a discussion of those findings, and implications for current literature. It will also discuss the delimitations and limitations of the study, as well as recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological research was to identify and describe the perceptions and experiences of male elementary school counselors (MESC) from school districts located in southeastern North Carolina and to gain a better perspective of their experiences and perceived challenges. This study was important to help understand this phenomenon and to identify prevailing themes in the study, which provided firsthand insight about the experiences of MESC. The intent of this study was to examine and further understand the lived experiences of MESC in order to create an awareness of the limited individuals that make up this population and to identify reasons that such a phenomenon exists. This chapter consists of a summary of the research findings and a discussion of the findings. The findings of this study are discussed in the context of relevant literature and theory. The methodological relevance and implications of this study are also discussed. The final section of the chapter outlines delimitations and limitations in the study and gives recommendations for future research of this topic.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore and describe the perceptions and experiences of MESC from school districts located in southeastern North Carolina to gain a phenomenological perspective of their experiences and perceived challenges as existing MESC. Analysis of the data was conducted once all data and demographic information was gathered (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The findings of this research evolved from the collective experiences of the participants in this study. Together, those experiences produced themes, which were identified through the review of each of the nine participants' semi-structured interviews for this study. The three themes produced by the data

analysis of each participant interview included role models, challenges, and beliefs. These themes resulted in eight sub-themes, which developed as a result of the research question that guided this phenomenological study and reflected the overall experiences of the participants.

The research question for this study asked: “What are your experiences as a male elementary school counselor?” Role model was one theme that developed through the collective experiences of the MESC’s who participated in this study. Three sub-themes, career influence, father figures, and families, emerged as a result of the theme, role model. Eight of nine participants cited the positive influence that they had been able to have with their students regarding careers. Participants pointed out that as MESC’s, they defied the stereotypes of what was traditionally acceptable career roles for men and women. As individuals in a nontraditional role, they cited that they served as examples for their students, especially male students, that they can have a place in education and can be school counselors, too. Finally, many of the MESC participants stated that they had worked in prior occupations before becoming a school counselor and were able to provide even more career knowledge and experiences to their students.

Participants acknowledged the unintentional place that they hold as role models for the students that they serve. All participants cited the void that many fill as substitutes for students who do not have a father or male in their lives. Some MESC’s explained that their daily presence with students helped to demonstrate how a male should carry themselves and act. Similarly, participants also stated that they were especially able to have a positive impact on the male students at the school. The MESC’s also cited that they not only served as a role model for male students and students with only a mother in the home but also as a role model for their career.

The last sub-theme of role model was families. The interactions with MESC’s varied among participants. All participants stated that many family interactions were dependent on certain factors. Mark stated, “Because I have a young child, I am able to see and understand the

parents' perspectives." Due to the high number of single-parent families, many families with no male presence looked to the male educators to help supplement that void (Vespa, 2021; Wood & Brownhill, 2016). All MESCs in this study stressed that in order to have positive interactions, it was vital for them to convey to the families their common interest that they both have for the child to succeed.

Another theme that addressed the research question for this study was challenges that MESCs stated that they encountered in their role. One challenge that all participants expressed was that initially, they worried about working with elementary-age children. However, each participant said that this was no longer a concern since becoming more familiar with the elementary level and working everyday with the students. Several participants stated that they were glad to be able to have a positive impact on students during the early stage of their lives. They felt that this was a pivotal time in the students' developmental stage where they could "plant a seed" to help children begin life on a positive note. Three sub-themes that emerged from challenges were non-counseling duties, stereotypes, and lack of recruitment, which supported the literature on this topic.

A study by Schmaltz (2016) examined the level of stress among counselors and cited higher levels of stress in the following areas: financial security, nonprofessional duties, and professional job overload. Participants in the current study cited duties and/or expectations that were in place or expected of them that were outside of their role as an elementary school counselor. Paul recalled his female administrator asking that he be present for parent conferences with male parents. This assertion was further substantiated in research conducted by Lewis-Jones (2012), Schmaltz (2016), and Warin (2019), in which the principals acknowledged that they often asked MESCs to perform other duties outside of the scope of an elementary school counselor.

The MESC participants also cited that while administration and teachers often support the addition of males as elementary school counselors, often, the reasons may be misguided and not necessarily based on the best interest of the students. A lack of understanding by administrators and teachers concerning the proper role of elementary school counselors was also a major concern for MESC participants (Cockrell, 2020; Reiner et al., 2009). Most participants stated that overall, they had positive interactions with these two groups, but they had to inform them of their responsibilities, as well as the limitations of their role as a school counselor.

Stereotypes was another sub-theme of challenges, which was experienced by all participants. The primary consensus of participants was the stereotype that men who work with children do so for ulterior motives. Research supported this view that male individuals who were employed in elementary school settings encountered scrutiny when engaging with youngsters, primarily due to concerns related to pedophilia and societal norms (Davis & Hay, 2018). Some participants in the study, like Antoine, explained that MESC participants have commonly been mistaken as the physical education (PE) teacher or principal. This assertion supported the research that explored the scrutiny that males who work in nontraditional occupations face by society (DiBordis & Dodson, 2006).

Even in the 21st century, this area of education has remained a profession where females constitute the majority (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2021b). Traditional hegemonic expectations have still been prevalent. Men employed in the field of education may encounter societal disapproval due to their decision to pursue careers in elementary teaching. During interviews, almost all the participants expressed the fact that most individuals were surprised when they learned that they were a MESC. Antoine stated that once, a parent commented, "I never seen a man school counselor before." Most participants attributed this

common error of parents to the fact that much of society still holds traditional ideas of the proper roles and place of males in education.

The lack of recruitment efforts by school districts and universities was also considered a major challenge for MESC. Some participants believed that the lack of recruitment of MESC was a major contributor to the continued hegemonic beliefs that much of society have regarding males in education. Seven of the MESC that were interviewed stated that there were no real efforts to recruit males into the field of education, especially counseling. One participant, Paul, did credit a college professor who suggested that he may be a good fit for the counseling program at the college that he attended. Some participants explained that they were recommended to go into other fields that were more expected of a male to pursue. Education, especially school counseling at the elementary level, has been viewed as a nontraditional occupation (Chusmir, 1990; Di Borders & Dodson, 2006). Another reason that participants believed that there was a lack of MESC was that most male counselors were placed at the middle or high school level so that they could coach or help with other administrative needs. Research participants provided reasons based on their unique experiences and firsthand knowledge about their belief of why there were so few MESC.

The final theme that emerged from this study was the beliefs of the MESC that participated in this study. The perceptions and experiences that these individuals shared provided a firsthand glimpse of MESC. Antoine, Bill, John, and Paul shared how their prior life experiences, such as military service and being a former teacher, helped them to continue their services to others and become a MESC. The collective viewpoints and firsthand experiences of the participants in this phenomenological investigation provided insight into the absence of MESC. Increasing awareness in this area can bolster support for current counselors and promote

the retention and recruitment of this essential cadre in elementary schools, benefiting all students (Edwards, 2013; Schmitt, 2015).

A final sub-theme regarding the theme of beliefs was suggestions for new MESCs by existing ones. During interviews, participants provided valuable information for males who may decide to enter the counseling field as an elementary school counselor. One overarching point that continued to emerge throughout each interview was the importance of connecting with other counselors, especially with other male counselors at the same level, if possible. Being aware of what resources are available at an elementary counselor's disposal was also stressed by some participants. Luke recommended that new MESCs personalize their counseling program and not feel obligated to conform to the structure used by their female peers. Isiah reflected, "Remember it's all about the kids."

Discussion

This section of Chapter Five analyzes the research findings in connection to the empirical and theoretical literature that was offered in Chapter Two. The findings of this research study supported the current literature on this topic and added additional findings regarding the actual lived experiences of MESCs. This study further lent credence to the theory of circumscription and compromise proposed by Gottfredson (1981; Gottfredson & Lapan, 1997). The perspectives and firsthand experiences of MESCs in the current study provided further insight into this phenomenon.

Empirical Literature

Three themes emerged from exploring the shared actual lived experiences and perspectives of MESCs that participated in this study. The research question that was addressed through the identification of themes for this study was upheld by the existing or historical research found in the literature on this topic. There have been very few male counselors in the

elementary setting. Experiences that many males face as elementary counselors discouraged other males from seeking this occupation and remaining in the counseling field altogether (Thompson, 2021). For example, MESCs make up 25% of elementary school counselors compared to 75% being female elementary school counselors (Elementary School Counselor, 2021).

The theme of role models and existing literature was supported from participant responses concerning unintentional responsibilities that have been placed on them because they are a male. Due to the growing number of families with no male presence in the home, many MESCs participants have been expected to help fulfill this void. Paul explained that he often heard from moms that they were having to “be the father and the mother.” Antoine also commented that he was often asked by mothers if they would talk to their sons about their behavior. Participant responses supported existing research that more male educators were expected to serve as appropriate role models for at-risk male youth (Cushman, 2008). Participants shared that they have often filled the role of a surrogate father that many children are lacking in their lives.

Family interactions were one sub-theme of role models that invaluable insight was provided for through participant interviews on their experiences and perceptions of partnering with parents. The interactions of parents diverged from existing research in the sense that phenomenological relational interactions were not addressed in previous studies. Historical research did, however, demonstrate the support and call by parents for a greater male presence in the elementary setting, due to the high number of absentee fathers, as well as milestones and perceptions of children during this critical developmental stage (Davie & Hay, 2017; McGrath & Sinclair, 2013). Participants provided strategies that they used when trying to relate and communicate with parents. James explained that the strength and positivity of his relationship

with parents was often determined by his relationship with the student. Matthew commented that he fostered positive parental interactions by making an effort to get to know the parents and communicate with them that they both want the best for the child. Bill let parents know that as an older elementary school counselor, he had a lot of experience with elementary-aged children and he could assist parents in making sure that their child received the best educational experience possible.

One of the themes that was supported by current research was the challenges that MESCs experienced. This theme also encompassed three sub-themes: non-counseling duties, stereotypes, and lack of recruitment. Non-counseling duties by MESCs was another major challenge that was supported by previous research. These duties were described as duties or tasks outside of the job role of school counselors (Lewis-Jones, 2012; Schmaltz, 2016; Warin, 2019). Male participants in this study confirmed existing research that MESCs were often requested to perform tasks outside of the responsibilities and duties of an elementary school counselor. The majority of participants stated that they were routinely asked to carry heavy items and/or monitor outside drop off and pick up lines in the morning and afternoon. Paul, Mathew, and John cited that they were often asked to serve or perform disciplinarian-type duties like bus issues or dealing with angry parents. Paul and Matthew stated that they discussed the inappropriateness of this request with their administrator and explained how it contradicted and could even hinder their role to be an effective MESC. They both stated that the principals were willing to listen concerning this matter, but both believed that it would have never been an issue had they not been male.

Positive interactions and the ability to work collaboratively with teachers and administration was an important determinant of the success of MESCs (Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008; Scott, 2018; Thomas, 2011). Statements by participants in this study supported this claim when talking about the interactions with these two groups. Mark stated that he made sure to try

to effectively communicate his role as an elementary school counselor to administration so that a clear understanding existed of what his role was and was not. He elaborated that he utilized resources, such as the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) Principal/Counselor Agreement, to work together and interact in a positive manner with his administration about his duties. Participants also conveyed that if they had the support of the principal, then teachers typically would follow their lead in understanding the proper scope of a MESC's job (Clark & Amatea, 2004; Cockrell, 2020). Overwhelmingly, study participants stated that their experience with teachers was mostly positive; however, they maintained that it was important to inform teachers in a positive way what they were allowed or able to do or not do as elementary school counselors.

This qualitative study confirmed many of the challenges that MESC's have experienced, such as stereotypes that hinder males from entering the field of elementary counseling and make existing MESC's apprehensive in their interactions with elementary students (Karpova et al., 2018). John explained that many male counselors have had a tendency to work at the higher educational levels like middle and high schools. He elaborated that most of his male colleagues stated that they felt uncomfortable working with younger children and were concerned about the perceptions of those who think males working with elementary children is not appropriate.

According to existing research, males who work in elementary settings have often been labeled as being deviant or gay for choosing a nontraditional job commonly associated with females (Moss-Racusin & Johnson, 2016). This view was corroborated by the current study's participants. For example, Mark, James, and John explained that they often made sure that they had a female present when talking to a female student or that they talked in a public place, such as in the library, or stationed themselves with students where school cameras are located just as a precautionary measure (Cruickshank et al., 2022). Almost all participants conveyed that a double

standard existed between men and women who work at the elementary level. This view upheld similar research by Davis and Hay (2018), who stated that males in nontraditional occupations may face scrutiny by society due to pedophilic fears.

Both existing literature, as well as current research, substantiated the severe lack of male school counselors at the elementary level. Historical literature, as well as this current study, lent credence to the sub-themes of hegemonic expectations and lack of recruitment that have accounted for such a small number of MESC. For example, Willyard (2011) cited those occupations that have predominantly been female, such as counseling and teaching, may inadvertently result in lower salaries compared to male-dominated jobs. Matthew and Isaiah both explained that they believed that the lack of sufficient compensation was one barrier that hindered more men from becoming elementary school counselors. Bill supported this view by explaining that many of his male colleagues preferred to work at the high school level, where they had opportunities to coach or teach drivers' education in order to supplement their income. Schmitt (2015) also cited that afterschool activities at the middle and high school levels have allowed males a way to generate extra income to support themselves and their families. Several of the participants' interviews aligned with the thought that although they lived in a relatively modern era, some areas, such as males in elementary education, have still been considered taboo by much of society. Many people have still considered women to be more nurturing and thereby, more qualified to work with elementary-age children (Skelton, 2012). This view contrasted sharply with other individuals in education who believed that there was a great need for a more-balanced male presence in elementary school counseling.

The lack of MESC. cannot only be attributed to hegemonic expectations but also due to a lack of recruitment efforts of this subgroup of educators (Skelton, 2012). This position from existing research has been supported through the interview responses of current participants of

this study. For instance, out of all nine participants in this study, only Paul and Luke stated that counseling or education was recommended to them as a good career choice. Mark stated that better recruitment efforts are needed in order to gain and retain more MESCs.

The final theme that emerged from this study was the beliefs of MESCs. This study differed from historical research in that the main source of information and findings developed from the actual lived experiences of MESCs (Edwards, 2013). One sub-theme that developed was MESCs' perceptions on the field of elementary school counseling based on the influence of their personal life experiences as elementary counselors. Participants overwhelmingly cited that working at the elementary level as a school counselor afforded them the opportunity to "plant seeds to help children grow," "share life experiences with students," "give back to others," "provide early intervention," and serve as a male role model for those students who need that additional support. All participants stated that they felt able to make the greatest impact on their students while serving as an elementary school counselor.

Suggestions for new MESCs was the final theme that arose from this qualitative phenomenological study. All participants in this study offered valuable advice for potential or new MESCs. Similar statements by study participants upheld historical research and provided further recommendations for new MESCs. Historical research addressed the scrutiny that many male educators might face. For example, Cruickshank et al. (2022) cited the significance of proactive planning of probable circumstances or events involving a student that may be perceived as inappropriate by others. Earlier research also cited the importance of having supportive leaders who establish clear guidelines, institute role expectations, and encourage collegial support as ways to support and help MESCs in doing their job well (Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008; Scott, 2018; Smith, 2022; Thomas, 2011).

Participants in this study shared similar suggestions on how new MESCs can be successful at their job. Paul stated, “find a male... that’s experienced that you can have as a ‘go-to’ person, not only for advice but on how to do things.” Previous research also stated the value of having existing male counselors serve as mentors to encourage new male school counselors to enter the field (Hansen & Mulholland, 2005; Wise, 2020). Luke’s advice to new MESCs was to “just make it your own, don’t feel like you have to be exactly like a female counselor might be or do things.” Matthew and Bill both advised new MESCs to remember their purpose and the importance of relationship building with the students and other stakeholders. John stressed the importance of networking and building capacity with other elementary school counselors. This sentiment was shared in previous research by Wise (2020), who stated that pairing male students with current MESCs when completing internships could also help promote the recruitment and retention of MESCs. Isaiah shared his advice for MESCs and educators alike, stating, “Remember it’s all about the kids. It’s not about you.”

Theoretical Literature

The theories that guided this study were Gottfredson’s (1981) circumscription and compromise theory and Bandura’s (1994) theory of self-efficacy as it relates to careers. These two theories highlighted important factors for individuals who pursued atypical professions, such as becoming MESCs. Both of these theories are described as they relate to the current study.

Gottfredson’s Theory of Circumscription and Compromise

Gottfredson’s (1981) theory of circumscription and compromise also related to this studied topic. The theory elucidated the influence of modeling on the construction of self-concept and occupational perspectives or ambitions acquired during this period of development. Students at the elementary level begin to form their early impressions of career perceptions and views (Gottfredson, 1981; Gottfredson & Lapan, 1997; Ivers et al., 2012). The MESC

participants stated that they felt that their presence and interactions with their students provided a unique opportunity to model and help shape career beliefs about the appropriateness of nontraditional jobs, such as males in elementary education. Paul reflected this view when he spoke to the influence that he felt he had regarding career perceptions as a MESC:

So, I think students, especially male students, seeing me in this role would make them feel more comfortable not only to go into education, but maybe a setting or career that's different from what the majority of males go into. So, I hope that I am a living example of maybe how males don't have to be stuck in certain careers that they are expected to go into.

Participants reflected that in their time as a MESC, students have expressed interest and considered a career in education as a possibility in the future. Luke stated that during his experience as a MESC, some male students had expressed interest in potentially pursuing a career in education in the future when they were older. Participants felt that their presence and influence on elementary-aged students helped broaden their career perspectives and broke down traditional or emerging stereotypical beliefs at a critical developmental stage regarding career appropriateness. This theory's emphasis on the importance of the establishment of careers beliefs and perceptions during the early developmental years of a child's life was corroborated and supported by MESC's personal encounters and experiences with their students.

Bandura's Self-efficacy Theory

Bandura posited that an individual's perception of their self-confidence in doing tasks, also known as self-efficacy, serves as a mediator between their knowledge and their actions. Furthermore, Bandura suggested that people's beliefs in their ability to achieve goals play a crucial role in determining the actions that they choose to undertake (Bandura, 1986, 1997, 2000). This role in the development of occupational knowledge and career perceptions can have

a substantial impact on occupational perspectives and roles in the early years (Betz, 1994, 2000). As such, participants in the study echoed the importance of MESCs being part of these early and formative years in their students' lives in order to help enhance their views on both traditional and nontraditional careers, such as theirs. Study participants shared their perspective as a current MESC; Paul, for example, stated, "I hope that my presence will help students to see especially the males that men can be in education as something other than administrators or coaches, and it's not just for the females."

Bandura's theory of self-efficacy acknowledged the importance of early influence in developing, shaping, and instilling the belief in the early years regarding occupational knowledge and roles about careers (Betz, 1994, 2000). Having professional school counselors, particularly MESCs, throughout this crucial stage of a student's life could offer them a more accurate and unbiased evaluation of their career prospects and the responsibilities associated with such occupations. This theory was further supported based on the phenomenological perspectives of the MESC participants shared in this study.

Implications

The research findings of this study provided theoretical, empirical, and practical implications. The findings revealed the actual lived phenomenological perspectives of MESCs and their unique experiences regarding their role in the environment and educational level that they worked in. The findings of this study also served to inform stakeholders of the views, perspectives, and experiences of current MESCs in an effort to understand relevant issues as they related to roles, challenges, recruitment and retention, and their beliefs about their profession. The theoretical, empirical, and practical lenses are explored in the following sections.

Theoretical Implications

The implications of the theories stated in this study are presented based on the participants and their stated impact as MESCs. The participant experiences and perceptions lent credence and additional support to Gottfredson's (1981) theory of circumscription and compromise. The premise of this theory stated that children of elementary age begin to form their opinions and beliefs about careers and what they believe is a proper career based on gender (Gottfredson, 1981; Gottfredson & Lapan, 1997; Ivers et al., 2012). The findings gathered as a result of this study supported existing findings and demonstrated the lack of exposure and tendency of students and stakeholders to relegate education and/or counseling as a nontraditional and atypical career for males who enter this profession. Participants further substantiated this stance based on actual lived experiences as MESCs and their personal perceptions regarding their occupation. Bandura's (2000) self-efficacy theory also supported the career applications regarding self-efficacy, as it relates to career perspectives and competencies through the use of such things as social modeling. The MESC participants provided examples, as well as shared actual experiences, that demonstrated the need for early exposure of MESCs at this level of education. The influence of MESC's actual lived experiences at this stage can help provide a more-balanced representation and allow students to form objective beliefs about career appropriateness in an unbiased and informed manner.

Empirical Implications

There were empirical implications in regard to the participants and focus of this study. Existing research about MESCs highlighted many of the challenges, stigmas, lack of resources, and stereotypes that MESCs have experienced. Hegemonic expectations concerning this participant population made it difficult for this group to operate in the most effective and efficient capacity in their respective roles (Edwards, 2013; Schmitt, 2015; Skelton, 2012). During

interviews and observations made from MESC's, many of the same concerns found in existing studies were confirmed through participant disclosure and the overall themes identified in this study. Existing research showed that there were very few MESC's and that those who did work in the field encountered various obstacles, due to societal expectations and preconceived beliefs (Cruickshank et al., 2022; Edwards, 2013; Schmitt, 2015). These issues experienced by MESC's have been apparent and supported when examining data generated from this study.

The findings from this study provided greater awareness of the actual perspectives and experiences of MESC's and their impact on the field. There have been several studies that focused on males in elementary settings; however, little research has existed apart from this study that utilizes and/or solicits input and feedback from actual MESC's who are currently working in this field. The findings generated from this study supplied phenomenological evidence and real-world feedback from MESC's, while filling a gap by providing firsthand experiences from the population being investigated.

Practical Implications

Awareness of the obstacles for MESC's through the fresh and current perspectives provided in this field can help to improve conditions, bring about educational change and reform, and create more recruitment and retention efforts for this nontraditional population. Findings from the study helped build, bring attention, and establish potential opportunities to inform relevant stakeholders to provide optimal support for existing and future MESC's. This awareness was significant in order to enhance the level of student impact and degree of success possible when performing their job duties and responsibilities. The implications from this study can also lend credence and support through participants' input regarding opportunities for growth by supporting initiatives and implementing policy changes with fidelity that promote and encourage recruitment, retention, and support of MESC's. The implications from the findings of this study

can also be carried over to other marginalized or obscure populations, such as male elementary teachers or male school nurses.

Christian Worldview

The Christian worldview was not addressed in this study, as it focused on a more non-religious subject matter. However, one of the themes that was identified from this study was the need for personal guidance, understanding, and mentorship of MESC's. In the context of the Christian worldview, the desire for a just and positive presence for those individuals who do not have the appropriate influence and support in their lives has been a foundational premise of the Christian faith. Within the confines of this study, there was certainly a need for existing MESC's to support and assist children who lacked positive examples or male figures in their lives. Help for those in need has also been a mandate by our heavenly Father. In Matthew 5:16, the Bible states, "In the same way, let your light shine before others that the world may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (*New International Version [NIV]*, 2011). The MESC participants had been placed in a position in their role where they are able to glorify and uphold Christian principles through their interactions with the students that they encounter. Participants' lived experiences highlighted examples where they were often called to serve as positive examples and role models and provide guidance as MESC's in the lives of their students. Finally, 1 Thessalonians 5:11 states, "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up" (*NIV*, 2011). This wisdom was also one of the guiding tenets of the school counseling profession and a main purpose that participants strived for in their day-to-day encounters with the students that they served.

Delimitations and Limitations

The delimitations for this study were intentional and served to provide phenomenological evidence, which has been scarce-to-almost-non-existent concerning this area of study. Only

those MESCs who had served as an elementary school counselor for at least a period of 2 years were interviewed for this study. This was a purposeful decision to help enhance the amount of time and experience that a MESC would have in order to provide an informed answer to interview questions based on their time and experience as a school counselor. Another delimitation of this study was to use a qualitative, phenomenological approach. This methodology was selected in order to capture real-world and actual lived experiences from the research participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This decision was intentional in order to fill an identifiable gap in the literature, which lacked firsthand knowledge and input from the actual population being investigated. The scope of the study concentrated on counties within southeastern North Carolina. The intent of this delimitation was to evaluate perspectives of MESCs who shared the same geographical setting and environment. This phenomenon was evaluated in North Carolina, as the study was conducted by a current school counselor in this state who was cognizant of the school counseling programs within the state.

There were limitations that occurred in this study outside the control of parameters established for the research. All the participants in the study except for one were 45 years of age or older. This limitation indicated several potential caveats. First, with almost 90% of the participant population over the age of 45 years, this limitation indicated that the number of MESCs was extremely low and reflected that males have not been entering the field of school counseling at the elementary level. When the recruitment for this study began, there would have been no way to know that the sample would not be a more representative span of ages among the participants as a whole.

Another limitation of this research was that out of the 11 school districts in southeastern North Carolina who were invited, only a small number took part in the study. Several factors contributed to this lack of participation. For example, six school districts did not have any

MESCs, and one denied permission for research from researchers not employed by their district. Therefore, the study was limited to only four school districts in southeastern North Carolina who had MESCs in their county and gave permission for research to be conducted within their district. This limitation meant that all nine participants came from just four school districts.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on the experiences and perceptions of MESCs. It recruited participants from only the southeastern portion of North Carolina. While this study provided the actual lived experiences and firsthand perspectives of MESCs, which had been lacking in existing research, further research is still needed. Since this study was limited to a particular geographical region in only one state, further studies in other regions and states could provide a more balanced collection of perspectives and experiences about this phenomenon. A further recommendation was that a quantitative study on this topic could be conducted, which could investigate this phenomenon on a national level. This collection of data could also account for geographical, cultural, and societal differences across the United States.

Another recommendation was that since almost 90% of the participants in this study was over the age of 45 years, future studies should target a younger or more-balanced representation of a population at the beginning or middle of their careers instead of nearing retirement. A different demographic population might also provide different information about conditions and considerations that young males may consider in today's society when entering the field of counseling. An additional recommendation was that future research of this topic could be conducted by a male researcher. Given the unique nature of some topics discussed with the participant population, MESCs might feel more at ease talking to another male. Finally, further research on this topic could be conducted using a case study design. This approach would permit

the inclusion of school districts and universities and would help gain a more conceptually complete picture of the topic and find ways to increase and retain the number of MESCs.

Summary

This transcendental phenomenological qualitative study examined the experiences and perspectives of MESCs in southeastern North Carolina. It was guided by Gottfredson's (1981) theory of circumscription and compromise and Bandura's (1986, 1997, 2000) self-efficacy theory. The findings from the study generated three themes and eight sub-themes, which represented the overall experiences of study participants. The three themes included role models, challenges, and beliefs. The theme role models had three sub-themes: career influence, father figures, families. The theme challenges had three sub-themes: non-counseling duties, stereotypes, and lack of recruitment. The theme beliefs encompassed two sub-themes: perceptions and influences of life experiences and suggestions for new MESCs. The three themes answered the research question that guided this study. The findings supported the theoretical frameworks for this study, emphasizing the influence and role of modeling and observation while working with elementary students as male school counselors.

The research question for this study asked what were the participants' experiences as a MESC. The majority of participants shared common experiences and had similar perspectives about those experiences as a MESC. Participants all expressed challenges that they experienced, as well as the influence and impact that they had with the students at the school where they worked. The themes that developed from this study highlighted such challenges, as well as perspectives from participants about suggestions, and resources needed to support MESCs. The findings and implications of this study helped to increase awareness regarding the lack of MESCs. It also identified some of the obstacles that many MESCs encountered when fulfilling their duties and responsibilities as a school counselor. When compared to previous research on

this topic, the findings reflected that very little change or progress had been made over the years regarding MESCs or male educators in general (Dodson & Di Borders, 2006; Edwards, 2013; Schmitt, 2015). This study utilized the actual lived experiences of MESCs, which provided support for this position regarding their roles and their perceptions about their occupation.

The implications of this study were far reaching, as they extended to various stakeholders within the educational system. It was essential that school districts and higher education learn how to address the concerns expressed by these participants regarding the challenges and obstacles that they faced in their roles as MESCs. It was also important that these concerns be addressed not only for our current MESCs but also in order to ensure and encourage growth and continued interest in serving in this role as a male counselor. These findings demonstrated the need for greater awareness and action in order to recruit and retain MESCs. This will help achieve a more-balanced representation and provide a wider range of perspectives.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Email

As a student in the Community and Care Counseling Department in the School of Behavioral Science at Liberty University. I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The title of my research is *The Experiences and Perspectives of Male Elementary School Counselors: A Phenomenological Study*. The purpose of my research is to identify and understand male elementary school counselors' experiences and perceptions in selected North Carolina counties. As a male elementary school counselor in the selected counties, I am writing you are eligible participates to join my study.

Participates must be 18 years of age or older, must be male, and have worked as an elementary school counselor for at least two years. Participates, if willing will be asked to complete a five-minute Qualtrics survey to gather demographic information, participate in a 45–60-minute online semi- structured interview. Your responses will be recorded and transcribed using a software computer program called Oterrai.com. The participant will also be asked to review the transcript from the interview for accuracy and data collection purposes, which is expected to last approximately 45-60 minutes. Participation in this study is strictly voluntary. Personal information will be collected from participants; however, pseudonyms will be used throughout the research process to ensure participant confidentiality.

To participate, please contact me at [REDACTED] so I can send you the link to a screening survey.

A consent form will be sent to you if you are determined to be eligible for my study. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document prior to scheduling the interview. Please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Angel M. Chavis, Dissertation Candidate Liberty University [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Appendix B

Permission Letter

As a graduate student in the School of Behavioral Science at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for doctorate degree. The purpose of my research is to conduct a phenomenological study on the experiences and perceptions of male elementary school counselors. I am researching male elementary school counselor's perceptions of the lack of male school counselors at elementary schools, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

I am requesting your permission to invite selected male counselors within your school district, to participate in this study. Selected participants will receive an email with an informed consent information prior to participating. A copy of the email that will be sent to all male elementary school counselors, upon your approval, is enclosed for your review.

Upon consent, participants will be asked to complete a five-minute survey and contact me to schedule a convenient time to conduct an online interview. Participants and school district identifying information will remain completely confidential. The online interview is estimated to take approximately 45-60 minutes to conduct. Interviews will be audio and video recorded and transcribed using a computer software program called Otterai.com. Member checking will be used to ensure the validate the accuracy of interview transcripts, which will take approximately 45-60 minutes.

The data will be used to gain a first-hand understanding from male concerning their experiences and perspectives as male elementary school counselors. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this stud is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. You can reach me by using the contact information listed below. Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grand permission, please provide a signed statement on official letterhead indicating your approval or respond by email to [REDACTED]

Sincerely,
Angel M. Chavis
Dissertation Candidate
Liberty University
[REDACTED]

Appendix C

Demographic Questionnaire

1- How many years have you been a school counselor?

0 to 5 years

6 to 10 years

11 years or greater

2- Do you have prior experience as a teacher?

Yes

No

3- If you answered yes, to the previous question how many years did you teach?

4- Select all the school levels that you have worked in as a school counselor?

Elementary Level

Middle School Level

High School Level

5- Are you the only licensed school counselor at your school?

Yes

No

6- Did you graduate from a CACREP accredited school counseling program?

Yes

No

7- What is the average enrollment at your school?

8- Was elementary counseling your first choice?

Yes

No

9- Have you worked in public schools in any other capacity besides school counselor?

Yes

No

10- Is your school located in a primarily rural or urban part of southeastern North Carolina?

Rural

Urban

11- Do you plan to stay in school counseling for the entirety of your career?

Yes

No

Questionnaire

Questionnaire

How many years have you been a school counselor?

Do you have prior experience as a teacher?

If you answered yes to question four, how many years did you teach?

Select all the school levels that you have worked in as a school

Was elementary counseling your first choice?

Have you worked in public schools in any other capacity besides school counselor?

Is your school located in a primarily rural or urban part of southeastern North Carolina?

Do you plan to stay in school counseling for the entirety of your career?

Appendix D

Interview Questions

Introduction Questions

1. Please tell me about yourself.
2. What do you like to do in your free time?
3. What is your proudest accomplishment?

To assist in answering Research Question 1, What are your experiences as a male elementary school counselor, the following questions will be asked to the participants:

4. What is your overall perspective about males entering the field of education?
5. Were you encouraged to enter the field of education, specifically counseling?
6. Please describe your experiences working with families as a male elementary school counselor.
7. Please describe experiences working with teachers and administration.
8. Have you ever been told to do or not do something at your school because you were male?
9. What benefits or qualities do you feel you bring to the elementary level as a male school counselor?
10. What advice or suggestions would you give any male considering entering the counseling profession as an elementary counselor?
11. Did your high school or university suggest education and/or counseling as a career option?
12. Why do you believe there are so few male counselors at the elementary level?

13. What benefits as it relates to student's career choices and exploration do you feel you contribute as a MESL?

Appendix E

Interview Protocol

- Introductions
- Introduction questions 1–3
- The purpose of the study will be explained.
- The informed consent will be reviewed.
- Interview questions 4–13 will be asked during the study and clarifying questions if needed. Appropriate response time will be given to the participant after each question is asked.
- The interview will conclude with a statement of thanks to the participant for the participation in the study.

Appendix F

Consent Form

Title of the Project: The Experiences and Perspectives of Male Elementary School Counselors: A Phenomenological Study

Principal Investigator: Angel Marie Chavis, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older, a male and have worked as an elementary school counselor for a period of no less than 2 years. Taking part in this research is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of this study is to explore and describe the perceptions and experiences of MESCs from school districts located in southeastern North Carolina to gain a phenomenological perspective of their experiences and perceived challenges as existing MESCs.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Complete a five- minute Qualtrics survey to gather demographic information.
2. Participate in one, 45-60-minute interview via Zoom. The interview will be audio- and video-recorded and transcribed afterwards by a transcription service.
3. Review the interview transcript to ensure that what has been recorded accurately reflects the experience that was discussed. This should require a minimum of 45-60 minutes.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include creating awareness of the experiences of Male Elementary School Counselors, thereby bringing awareness and insight to the needs and concerns of this population. Another societal benefit of this study is that it will fill a gap in counseling literature and add to the limited body of research associated with this specific group of elementary counselors.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

The risks involved in this study include the possibility of being triggered, emotionally, resulting in distressed feelings. If you become emotionally triggered and experience emotional distress, you can refuse to answer the question that triggered you, reschedule the interview for a later date or withdraw from the study. You are free to opt out of this study at any time. You are not obligated to answer any question with which you are not comfortable. The researcher will provide participants with a list of mental health resources that they can use, should they feel the need to so.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher and the transcriptionist will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer, flash drive, and locked office cabinet. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all physical records will be shredded.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription service. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer and flash drive for three years and then erased. Only the researcher and the transcriptionist will have access to these recordings. The transcriptionist will sign a non-disclosure agreement prior to the transcription of the data.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

The researcher conducting this study is Angel Chavis. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED] and/or

██████████ You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, ██████████
██████████

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515, at phone number 434-592-5530 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

- The researcher has my permission to audio-record and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix G

Pre-screening Questions

1. Are you male? Yes No

2. Are you 18 years of age or older? Yes No

3. How many years have you worked as an elementary school counselor?

4. Please provide an email address for me to contact you:

Appendix H**Codes**

Order of Code	Code/Sub-Code Name	Number of Snippets
1	Role Models	11
2	father figure	19
3	Career Influence	15
4	Challenges for MESC	7
5	Non-counseling duties manual work	25
6	Stereotypes	33
7	Stakeholder Interactions	1
8	Administrative	15
9	Teacher	9
10	Family	15
11	Lack of MESC	6
12	Hegemonic Expectations	28
13	Lack of Recruitment	22
14	Beliefs	3
15	Perceptions and influences of life experience	29
16	Suggestions for new MESC	18