

**Stay-at-Home Dads' Experiences With Their  
Children's Elementary Schools**

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### **Abstract**

The role of fathers in elementary education has shifted drastically in recent years. In particular, stay-at-home dads (SAHDs) have become more relevant in the lives of children. Despite these changes, there remains a paucity of research on SAHDs' experiences with their children's schools. This qualitative study examined SAHDs' perceptions of and experiences with their children's schools. The research identified three themes: (a) involvement, (b) interactions, and (c) communication. The researchers discuss implications for elementary school counseling practice as well as future areas of research.

## **Stay-at-Home Dads' Experiences With Their Children's Elementary Schools**

The landscape of fatherhood in the United States has shifted drastically in recent decades. With mothers now representing 70.5% of the workforce (Hoewe, Appleman, & Stevens, 2017; U.S. Department of Labor, 2013), there is an increased role of fathers in childcare. The number of stay-at-home dads (SAHDs) in the United States increased from 76,000 in 1994 to 189,000 in 2012 (Doucet, 2016; Fisher & Anderson, 2011), resulting in 1.125 million children living in a SAHD household (Kramer, Kelly, & McCulloch, 2015). According to the National At-Home Dad Network (2018), a SAHD is “any father who is the regular primary caregiver of his children, usually while his partner works outside the home as the family’s main breadwinner.” Various factors influenced these increases, including financial situations, female professional success, and parenting values (Rochlen, McKelley, & Whittaker, 2010).

The corresponding shift in the traditional male gender role from breadwinner to caregiver has resulted in a variety of social, family, and individual issues for SAHDs. Stay-at-home dads experience gender-determinism struggles associated with balancing stereotypical male and female roles, encountering prejudice and backlash from other adults, being seen as less competent caretakers, lack of social support, and negative stereotypes of the role (Fisher & Anderson, 2011; Heppner & Heppner, 2009; Rochlen et al., 2010; Sinno & Killen, 2009; Tinsley, Howell, & Amanatullah, 2015). Despite this increase in the prevalence of SAHDs and their identified struggles, a lack of research remains on the experiences of SAHDs and their families (Hoewe et al., 2017; Latshaw, 2015; Rochlen, McKelley, Suizzo, & Scaringi, 2008; Rushing & Sparks, 2017), with no

specific studies on SAHDs' interactions with their children's schools (Mueller & Buckley, 2014; Stevens, 2015).

### **SAHDs and Elementary Schools**

The role of SAHDs in schools is of specific importance considering the positive impacts of fathers' involvement on children's elementary education outcomes (Jeynes, 2015). Increased SAHD interactions have shown improved emotional bonding (Stevens, 2015), self-perceived academic ability (Mueller & Buckley, 2014), healthier social development (Sinno & Killen, 2009), increased homework completion and accuracy (Kim & Hill, 2015), reading and math achievement (Baker, 2014), higher school enjoyment (Beale, 1999), and ultimately increased graduation rates (Terriquez, 2013). Despite these positive outcomes of SAHD experiences for elementary students, there are still significant social and academic issues associated with SAHDs in schools. For example, Sinno and Killen (2009) noted that children struggle to understand gender roles in school because of mixed messages (i.e., gender and subjects such as math and science).

There also continues to be a lack of research into the impact of fathers of diverse and marginalized populations (e.g., African American, Latino, etc.) in their children's education (Baker, 2014; Terriquez, 2013). Understanding culturally diverse SAHDs is highly important due to low graduation rates and academic achievement as well as experiences of discrimination resulting in less participation in schools (Liong, 2017). These gender norms and expectations can be exasperated by the societal and gender-based stereotypes often seen in school settings which can leave fathers out of educational involvement (Mueller & Buckley, 2014). Schools would benefit from

additional education and interventions that may assist in avoiding cultural assumptions and becoming sensitive to factors such as race and socioeconomic status related to the roles of SAHDs and masculinity (Englar-Carlson & Kiselica, 2013).

SAHDs report struggling with school involvement, often reporting feeling unwelcome and perceived as not having the skills needed to support, teach, and care for school-aged children (Donaldson, Elder, Self, & Christie, 2011); however, many fathers report a desire to be involved in their children's education in such areas as classroom activities and school communication (Hart, 2011; Mueller & Buckley, 2014; Panscofar, Petroff, & Lewis, 2017). The elementary school age is of significant importance because children as young as six are beginning to develop socially-based gender and work ideas related to career roles and opportunities (Chelsey & Flood, 2017; Heppner & Heppner, 2009). For instance, children at this age are often subjected to societal ideologies of fathers as breadwinners and mothers as caregivers as the norm for families in the U. S. (Rushing & Sparks, 2017; Tinsley et al., 2015).

While a positive link exists between fathers' involvement and elementary school student's valuable academic, social, and personal outcomes, there is still a need for further exploration into appropriate education, advocacy, and interventions for SAHDs and elementary school engagement (Fischer & Anderson, 2012; Jeynes, 2015). School counselors are in a particularly advantageous position to foster the involvement of SAHDs in elementary schools. School counselors have the knowledge and training to work with culturally diverse populations. In addition, school counselors can utilize counseling, educational, and advocacy interventions to support the needs of SAHDs as an important sub-group of invested and involved parents. According to the American

School Counselor Association (2012), one of the primary responsibilities of professional school counselors is to engage in reform that promotes family engagement and relationships to ensure that all parents' voices are heard and valued (Beale, 1999; da Silva, 2014; Rushing & Sparks, 2017). It is through these combined voices that effective strategies can be developed for student success.

The purpose of this study was to collect and interpret stay-at-home dads' accounts of experiences with their children's elementary schools. Our research was guided by the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of SAHDs with their children's school(s)?
2. How do SAHDs perceive their role(s) in their children's schools?
3. What are SAHDs' perceptions of their experiences with various school stakeholders (e.g., teachers, school counselors, other parents, etc.)?
4. How might elementary schools and counselors better support the needs of SAHDs?

### **Method**

In this study, a qualitative study was conducted to explore SAHDs' experiences with their children's elementary schools. Our overall framework or approach was *descriptive-interpretive*, the conjoined term Elliott and Timulak (2005) employed to describe an array of qualitative designs (e.g., interpretive phenomenological analysis [Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009], consensual qualitative research, [Hill, 2012]) which "go by many 'brand names' in which various common elements are mixed and matched according to particular researchers' predilections" (p. 147). Finding branded approaches "confusing" and "somewhat" proprietary, Elliott and Timulak advocated a more *generic* approach to descriptive-interpretive qualitative research that "emphasizes common

methodological practices” (p. 148). Similarly, other qualitative researchers (e.g., Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003; Lichtman, 2013) describe generic or basic qualitative research as enabling flexibility in research designs, with attention to the congruence of methods and methodology and explanation of the analytic process and focus. Therefore, following Elliott and Timulak 2005, our descriptive-interpretive qualitative study employed a questionnaire from which to select a sample to explore the topic of SAHDs experiences, interviews to capture SAHD’s experiences, an analysis process led by the first author using open and axial coding and involving dialogue with the research team, and final reporting and interpretation of major themes on SAHD’s experiences, with particular attention to their school experiences.

As Lichtman (2013) notes, generic qualitative designs are often described in terms of their dominant method, as in our qualitative study, and write-ups convey the methods used and reasons they were employed. We chose to conduct interviews for two reasons. First, interviews are widely and effectively used in qualitative research to unearth and understand participants’ subjective experiences (e.g., beliefs, feelings, values, perspectives) (Roulston, 2010a). Second, Gubrium and Holstein (2002) note the ubiquity and perceived naturalness of interviews in what they described, over a decade ago, as the interview society. As expected, interviews were particularly revelatory of SAHDs’ experiences with their children’s schools and, also as anticipated, SAHDs were familiar and comfortable with an interview as a natural venue for sharing their experiences and how they made meaning of them.

## Participants

We interviewed 14 SAHDs recruited from the SAHD Network members who responded to a demographic questionnaire and indicated their willingness to participate in the interview study. The SAHD Network is an organization developed to provide knowledge, support, and advocacy for SAHDs across the United States. By reaching out to this national organization, we anticipated we would recruit a geographically varied and demographically diverse group of SAHDs to participate in the study. To be included in the study, SAHDs had to identify as fathers and have one or more children attending elementary school (enrolled in grades K-6). We interviewed 14 SAHDs twice each for a total of 28 interviews, a sufficient sample size given the relative homogeneity of experiences reported by SAHDs across the Western world (Kramer & Kramer, 2016) and the narrowness of our research questions (Bryman, 2012).

We collected geographic and demographic information about the 14 SAHDs who participated in the study. The SAHDs identified as African-American or Black ( $n = 1$ ), Caucasian or White ( $n = 11$ ), Hispanic or Latino ( $n = 1$ ), and Multiracial or Multiethnic ( $n = 1$ ). The average age of the SAHDs was 31.2 years old. They lived in a diverse variety of locations and regions in the United States. Five lived in the Southeast, four in the Midwest, one in the Southwest, and four in the West or Pacific Northwest. They identified their regions as rural ( $n = 1$ ), urban ( $n = 4$ ), and suburban ( $n = 9$ ). They reported having between one ( $n = 6$ ) and two ( $n = 8$ ) elementary school age children.

## Procedures

The research team obtained approval from an institutional review board (IRB) prior to commencing the study. The study also followed guidelines for working with human subjects as outlined by the American Counseling Association (2014). Participants were recruited from the SAHD Network, which noticed the study and provided a link to the demographic questionnaire on its website and sent out invitations to its electronic mailing list on 3 occasions. The questionnaire was housed on SurveyMonkey and included the informed consent for the questionnaire and interview study activities. After completing the questionnaire, SAHD participants could indicate their interest in participating in two interviews by providing their email addresses.

The SAHD participants who volunteered to participate in the interviews were contacted via email by the first author who then matched them with one of the research team members. The research team members contacted the SAHDs to schedule interviews that were conducted via Skype, Zoom, or phone. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted from what Roulston (2010a, 2010b) refers to as a romantic orientation. Romantic interviews are epistemologically interpretivist in that they focus on participants' subjective accounts of their experiences, but unlike constructivist or postmodern interviews, romantic interviews seek to attain what they believe to be *true* accounts of participants' subjective experiences (Roulston 2010a, 2010b). In this way, romantic interviews may be described as ontologically realist regarding the existence of participants' inner selves. Romantic interviews therefore emphasize building genuine rapport between the interviewer and participant to elicit personal, emotional, reflective, and true subjective accounts of participants' lives, and are well aligned with an overall

descriptive-interpretive approach to qualitative research. The first interviews began with a description of the study and verbal consent. These interviews lasted between 30 and 75 minutes and were audio or video recorded and transcribed verbatim either by hand or using closed-caption video technologies. After all initial interviews had been conducted and transcribed, the research team met to discuss common themes and topics. The team then generated follow-up questions for the second interview to pursue some topics in more depth and with more clarity. This strategy is common in qualitative interview research as it allows researchers to respond to emerging trends revealed in ongoing analysis of interview data (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Roulston, 2010a; Seidman, 2006). The second interviews were conducted by the same research team member three to four weeks after the first interviews using Skype, Zoom, or phone. They lasted between 20 and 60 minutes, and were all audio recorded and transcribed.

### **Questionnaire and Interview Guide**

The questionnaire consisted of 11 questions to learn about the characteristics and experiences of SAHDs with elementary school children. It also included two items related to interest in participating in follow-up interviews. The 11 questions included demographic information (e.g., region, community, gender, ethnicity/race, relationship status; children's gender/sex, age, grade, and receipt of special services), and open-ended questions regarding their experiences as SAHDs in their children's schools.

The first and second semi-structured interviews were guided by lists of questions to capture SAHD's experiences with their children's elementary schools. The first interview guide consisted of questions such as "Can you tell me the story of what your child is like at school" and "What have your interactions with school personnel (e.g.,

teachers, administration, counselors)” been like?” The second interview guide asked SAHDs to review and ‘check’ their transcripts from the first interview, describe their day-to-day interactions with their children’s schools in more detail, talk about their interactions with other parents, discuss what they their children might think about them being SAHDs, and reflect on what being a father means to them.

### **Data Analysis**

The first author was primarily responsible for conducting the thematic analysis to answer the research questions. He followed the general steps outlined by Braun and Clark (2006) to guide the analytic process: (a) becoming familiar with the data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing the themes, (e) defining and naming the themes, and (f) producing a report of the results. The first author reviewed all the interview transcripts before beginning the coding process. A list and brief description of possible codes that emerged from the initial review was generated. This list was shared with the research team, which discussed the code list and noted codes they believed were particularly salient and/or reflected strongly in the literature. Together they generated a list of initial inductive and deductive codes that the first author used and iteratively refined as he coded all the interview transcripts. This step is what Saldaña (2013) refers to as ‘first cycle’ coding with the aim to fully describe the data in relation to the research questions. The first author then conducted second cycle coding that involved focused coding to find thematic and conceptual similarity between codes, develop broader code categories, and collapse code categories into major themes (Saldaña, 2013). The first author then composed an initial report of the themes and shared them with the research team who discussed and refined the themes based

on the literature related to SAHDs, with attention given to how the themes addressed the research questions.

### **Research Quality**

Roulston (2010b) summarizes the literature on quality in interviewing as encompassing: (a) how interview questions are asked, (b) how interview studies are designed and conducted, and (c) how the interview is conducted with attention to theoretical assumptions about how knowledge is produced in interviews. To this end Roulston delineates different approaches to quality based on the overarching orientation the interview study adopts. For romantic interview studies, hallmarks of quality can include: conducting multiple interviews (including member checking), being aware of how the researchers' values and beliefs shape the generation and interpretation of data, the extent to which researchers are sensitive to the need to pursue sensitive topics, and the extent to which researchers render the research process accessible and transparent in their write-ups (Roulston, 2010b).

Two interviews were conducted to facilitate building rapport with the SAHDs and to ask follow-up questions related to the first round of interviews. During both interviews, follow-up questions were asked to gain additional information regarding areas that seemed sensitive to participants (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2013). We used validation techniques and shared our own experiences to create an interview that would have a safe environment for sharing, an ethical strategy also shown to maximize participants' perceived benefits of being interviewed (Wolgemuth, et al., 2015). We also remained sensitive to how our individual experiences, beliefs, and values shaped the data and our interpretations. We particularly did this during research team meetings in which we

shared our personal experiences and emotional reactions to the participants' accounts, which helped us to see the participants' data from multiple viewpoints. Finally, detailed methods and results sections were composed with the aim to make the methods and findings accessible and transparent to readers. The themes were described and interpreted considering taking the research literature into account. In addition, it was noted how many participants contributed to each theme to evidence both the consistency and diversity of our participants' responses (see, for example, Maxwell, 2010). Finally, we included excerpts of the participants' and researchers' statements which were appropriate to reveal the themes and show how participants' discussions were elicited in conversation with us.

### **Research Team**

As descriptive-interpretive qualitative researchers, the researchers could not claim to be objective, nor sought to maintain objectivity as a regulatory ideal. The researcher's backgrounds and experiences as parents, counselors, educators, and academics were all integral to the design, conduct, and interpretation of the study of SAHD's experiences. Therefore, the authors briefly share their personal and professional backgrounds and motivations that were most relevant to the study in the biographical statements section at the end of this article.

### **Results**

The primary objective of this study was to understand the perceived experiences of SAHDs with their children's elementary schools. Based on the data analysis, three school-based themes emerged related to these experiences: (a) involvement, (b) interactions, and (c) communication. Each theme is discussed further in this section,

with quotes that illustrate the SAHDs' school experiences. Pseudonyms were assigned to each SAHD to protect confidentiality as well as provide a stronger connection to each participant in experiencing their lived stories.

### **Involvement**

For all 14 of the SAHDs, involvement was a key theme of their experiences in their children's elementary schools. In our results, involvement was related to SAHDs' engagement with school-based activities such as volunteering and leadership. While this involvement varied for each participant, there were many similarities among their reported types and amount of involvement. One of the most common modes of involvement related to experiences with school-based leadership such as a parent-teacher association (PTA) as reported by seven of the 14 SAHDs, who commented on discouraging interactions with this organization. For instance, Carl stated, "they have a very strong PTA, but I don't get into it because it is very politicized" and would rather "focus on the specific needs of my child." Largely, the SAHDs avoided the PTA because of not feeling welcomed. Tony discussed the gender aspect of PTA involvement noting that "I went to my first PTA meeting, the only guy there and there were a lot of whispers and a lot of weird looks." Additionally, Bruce noted, "I try to get involved in the PTA stuff and when you show up the first question is: Are you here with your wife?"

This idea of SAHD roles was also noted in the types of involvement for the participants. Many of the SAHDs ( $n = 8$ ) shared how involvement at their children's schools was gender-based. For instance, George said "there has sometimes been a tendency to ask me to do, like, manly things because I was the only man there. You know, assembling tables, helping kids cross the crosswalks, and things like that."

Similarly, Phil noted, that “dads have been asked to come and help do repairs in the playground or that sort of thing.” Cliff added, “if anything needs built or done at his school, I’m the go-to. I built all their playground equipment.” While most SAHDs noted enjoying these opportunities for engagement with their child’s school, they also desired to be involved in ways that reflected their abilities to teach and nurture children. Howard discussed how “it’s nice to actually have my daughter see me volunteer in her classroom, in her school, in her life, and she is pretty happy with it.” Likewise, Barry noted that he would like to see the school encourage “more non-physical involvement” in his child’s school. Overall, the idea of more involvement by more fathers in general was emphasized by Luke who shared his “disappointment in the lack of involvement by fathers at the school.”

Most of the SAHDs felt school personnel’s assumptions about fathers’ parenting abilities played a role in their involvement. Murray shared that teachers initially “didn’t quite respond to me as well as they do now. I don’t know if that was intentional or maybe they were just feeling that mom is usually the one that comes up.” Clark noted that “it depends on the teacher. I am sure that some pity my kid any time they forget something and say to themselves: When dad is the one at home, this is what happens.” Arthur also shared the vagueness of involvement as a SAHD noting, “I don’t normally get asked. I don’t know why I don’t get asked more often. You’d think since I am a stay-at-home dad.” The impact of these messages was expressed by Luke who shared that “You’re less likely to volunteer for something where you don’t see people like yourself so much there.” Ultimately, the participants expressed an overarching idea of fatherly significance with Bruce’s statement, “We are proud of being active fathers and just want

to feel accepted and valued in our children's education." This sentiment resounded with Cliff as well who expressed a desire for increased knowledge of the prevalence and benefits of being a SAHD in his clause, "getting the word out more and pressing the issue about fathers in the involvement in their child's life."

Participants reported feeling encouraged to become involved in only two instances: (a) if they had a recognized and known professional background in early and elementary education or (b) if their school explicitly engaged in efforts to involve fathers and diverse families. Howard, for example, stated his involvement was encouraged because "they understand my child development background." Hank also noted that his "elementary school is actively trying to involve dads in the school asking them to volunteer, particularly at the Boys and Girls Club, the aftercare program." George shared that being multiracial and a SAHD was viewed as an asset at his child's school in that it helped "to kind of cross some of the gender and racial divisions of the school."

### **Interactions**

The second theme based in the SAHDs' school perceptions and experiences related to the interactions with school personnel and parents. Specific interactions with elementary school staff and faculty were also discussed by the participants. Several ( $n = 6$ ) of these interactions were positive or neutral. Barry stated "I don't feel different or excluded" at his child's school. Thomas shared that while some teachers "have a bad initial reaction" he has "never had that initial reaction last past my initial interview with them. It goes away." This acceptance was also noted from Bruce who stated "the staff is very open to me. I never feel a stigma of being a man at that school. You know, it's very cool. I still get it from the parents, but I don't get it from the teachers."

This sentiment led to the next area of school interactions involving engagements with other fathers. The participants discussed their observations of the overall lack of fathers in the school setting and when they did experience these interactions, they were not always affirmatory. George discussed his interactions with other dads with his comment that with “professional dads...there’s an assumption that you’re a stay at home dad because you couldn’t hack it as a professional.” He added further that “people get uncomfortable when they ask me what I do for a living... they’re kind of thrown off. They don’t know how to continue the conversation.” This was also the case for Tony who said “at school, parents think I am lazy and don’t work. I hear the whispers.” Similarly, Howard stated, “I’ve talked to other stay-at-home dads. You’re kind of shunned until they figure out who you are and what you are about.”

The participants also discussed their experiences with mothers. Hank shared an instance in which he was “volunteering at his kids’ school and two mothers asked if he should be there; as if a man automatically means stranger danger.” Bruce shared a similar story in which he is making crafts for his daughter’s class and a mother “walks over and very politely reaches over and started grabbing stuff next to me. She looks and goes you go over there and sit down.” Further, Murry discussed, “I’m standing there with the same 40 or 50 women there to pick up their elementary child... a percentage of those do treat me different. I can’t really explain it, but I know it’s there.” Thomas also talked about this by sharing, “I know there are things going on in the background. I’ve heard mumblings about play groups...where they got their children together to do things and not invited me.”

The lasting message from this group of SAHDs expressed a desire for more positive and inclusive interactions with other parents, or as George stated, “I am just not sure how to connect with other parents.” Some of the participants shared their insights regarding this need. For example, Phil discussed that, “SAHD meetings would make sense” in the school setting for connecting and sharing experiences. Similarly, Cliff noted that his child’s school has “a mother’s program, but there’s no program like that for fathers” and “something like that could help some fathers.”

### **Communication**

Communication was the final theme for the SAHDs’ experiences in the elementary school settings and it mostly related to school personnel. Eleven participants noted communication frustrations with their children’s schools based on perceived gender-related issues. Arthur, for example, shared an experience during his child’s parent-teacher conference:

At first it was weird because we would go for teacher conferences and stuff. They’re always looking at my wife for, you know, things that happened at home while doing homework and, you know, the struggles and asking my wife. And my wife would look at me and be like, well what’s the answer to that question because you’re with them more than I am.

A similar experience came from Phil who noted that his “wife pointed out when we do parent-teacher conferences, the teacher pretty much spoke to my wife during the conference. I was involved, but the eye contact and back and forth communication was directed much more toward her than me.” Likewise, Murry shared that he had experienced similar communication issues with teachers, “I don’t think there is any intentional intent or mistreatment. I think they just sometimes think it’s weird to deal with

a guy when you are used to dealing with women when it comes to trying to explain something.” Conversely, Tony felt that this type of interaction was more willful, stating:

Other stay at home dads are going through the same thing. They’re being treated like ‘why isn’t mom here, where is the mom, why isn’t mom making the decisions.’ Well, the dad would say I am the responsible one. You know, I am the parent. Still today you see the stigma. You know, we will just talk to mom.

Another area of frustration involved communications regarding school issues.

Most of the SAHDs (nine) discussed how the school’s initial communication was directed toward mothers regardless of documentation that directed the school to contact the father. For instance, Thomas stated, “it took me probably a year to get them to understand if something’s wrong with the children, call me first.” Luke added to this content of frustration with “this is sort of a pet peeve in the dad world, like you can even put down I’m the preferred contact and somehow the mom still ends up getting called and she’s at work.” Another example came from Bruce who stated, “it’s frustrating when they always want to communicate with my wife via email or phone even if we put my email address down on the forms. They always send it to her and never to me.”

Participants also discussed various issues related to the flow of communication in the school setting with various school personnel. For example, Carl talked about how “talking to the teachers and telling them your needs directly seems to work a lot better than going through administration.” Likewise, Phil shared the he discussed “some of the communication issues we had going on” with his son’s teacher and “she was happy to correct them.” Tony similarly noted that the teacher is “open with me” and that “it’s more the administration, secretaries, nurse, and other professionals that make the assumptions” regarding his parental status. Conversely, Phil shared his positive

experiences with the school counselor when “she was working with our son on some kind of general behavior kind of stuff” and that “she’s just wonderful. I mean she’s just really great.” Similarly, George discussed his appreciation of the school counselor “just calling to provide an update” on his child’s status.

### **Discussion**

The results of this study support several aspects of the issues found in the existing literature on SAHDs. Specifically, we found gender stereotypes about fathers and their perceived abilities as caregivers are prevalent in school settings. As a result, the participants in this study exemplified these issues in the themes that emerged from the data.

The involvement of the SAHDs varied with their children’s schools, was strongly influenced by parental (e.g., PTA) and school personnel assumptions, and by stereotypes about fathers’ roles as parents. Considering the increased prevalence of fathers taking on active parenting roles, especially in education, it is vital that SAHDs involvement be encouraged (Stevens, 2015). With collaboration outlined as a key element for professional school counselors (ASCA, 2012), consulting with school personnel can be imperative in helping SAHDs to feel welcome, involved, and engaged (Donaldson et al., 2011; Mueller & Buckley, 2014). The inclusion of fathers is needed to help promote healthy identity development for both boys and girls (Heppner & Heppner, 2009; Sinno & Killen, 2009). Likewise, more fatherly engagement in their children’s caregiving results in greater confidence in their child-rearing skills (Rehel, 2014). Fathers could be encouraged to be involved in non-traditional male roles (e.g., caretakers) to address social stereotypes that can exist with young children (Latshaw &

Hale, 2016). For instance, inviting fathers to participate in classroom events (e.g., reading times, holiday parties, mentoring, etc.) could diversify the type of school involvement for SAHDs. These increased interactions of fathers may have a significant impact on their children's academic and social outcomes as well as overall enjoyment (Beale, 1999; Kim & Hill, 2015; Mueller & Buckley, 2014). This is particularly the case for SAHDs of culturally diverse backgrounds (Baker, 2014; Liong, 2017; Terraquez, 2013). Based on the responses from the participants regarding school involvement, it was clear that involvement is seen as a valued and desired element of their school experiences. Elementary school counselors can enhance the involvement of SAHDs by advocating for and educating other school stakeholders on the importance of including all parents in gender-neutral means throughout the school as well as providing information and outreach regarding potential involvement opportunities.

Another important area concerned the interactions of SAHDs with various school stakeholders and how these interactions were perceived by the SAHDs. All of the participants ( $n = 14$ ) discussed some type of meaningful school-based interaction ranging from overtly positive to covertly negative. Some of the experiences regarding negative stereotypes and the stigma of being a SAHD resembled the social perceptions of fathers and SAHDs found in the literature (Kramer & Kramer, 2016; Stevens, 2015). Five of the respondents shared experiences of being perceived as less than competent or out of place in the school setting, corroborating other studies' findings (Fisher & Anderson, 2012; Latshaw, 2015) concerning fathers' perceptions related to education and caregiving. It is no surprise that SAHDs continue to be hesitant about their interactions with school stakeholders. As a result, it is paramount that school counselors

enhance positive and collaborative interactions in the school setting as outlined by ASCA (2012) to promote inclusive and culturally diverse school environments. Providing information regarding the changing roles of fathers in the home, community, and workforce, encouraging diverse population engagement activities, and providing open and welcoming environments for SAHDs are all viable means for increasing positive school-based interactions. Encouraging these interactions can have significant positive results for all school stakeholders including re-shaping gender-role identity and experiences (Heppner & Heppner, 2009), increased satisfaction in the SAHD role (Rochlen et al., 2008), increased feelings of support (Rochlen et al., 2010), and improved school experiences (Flouri & Buchanan, 2004; Kim & Hill, 2015).

The final aspect involved school communications. For most of the SAHDs, communications with the school were frustrating and indicative of continued stereotypes of male roles in education settings. The primary communication issue discussed by the participants revolved around which parent the school staff would contact for updates, conferences, and emergencies. Many of the SAHDs discussed how despite clearly identifying themselves as the primary contact, the mothers were still the first point of contact. Additionally, several of the fathers recalled experiences of being overlooked at educational conferences in favor of the mother. Communication experiences such as these are not uncommon and can result in feelings of exclusion, stress, and frustration (da Silva, 2014; Hart, 2011; Panscofar et al., 2017). Adapting school communication practices is a simple strategy to improve the communications between school personnel and SAHDs. The participants in this study noted a desire to be recognized as the primary caregiver by school personnel. School counselors can provide appropriate

communications to ensure open and collaborative opportunities for the development of successful student strategies (ASCA, 2012; Beale, 1999). Furthermore, school counselors can seek to educate other school personnel on the evolving roles of SAHDs in academic settings to improve collaboration and promote positive student outcomes.

### **Implications for Elementary School Counselors**

The findings of this research study suggest potentially significant areas in which elementary school counselors can provide support to SAHDs in addressing their experiences and interactions with school stakeholders. As noted by the participants, a key area of concern is the need for more inclusive support and opportunities for interaction in the school setting. One way that school counselors could intervene with this aspect may include the development of a SAHD organization. Such an organization could provide meeting times, spaces, and information for SAHDs to gather and discuss their experiences and needs in the school setting with similar individuals. Such experiences could be effective in enhancing father involvement, satisfaction, and feelings of inclusion in the elementary school setting (Flouri & Buchanan, 2004; Jeynes, 2015; Kim & Hill, 2015; Rochlen et al., 2010; Sinno & Killen, 2009).

School counselors could also encourage other school personnel to include SAHDs in all aspects of school-based activities regardless of perceived gender-roles, and not only in activities related to physical activity (e.g., moving chairs, repairing playgrounds, etc.) or supervisory roles (e.g., field trips). Father inclusion could be extended to providing activities that involve caregiving and education, such as assisting in classroom activities or school-based holiday events in roles that are not traditionally considered to be father-based (e.g., providing food, decorating, engaging in creative

activities, etc.). Additionally, school counselors could include SAHDs in activities such as career exploration and diversity education provided to students. The balance of traditionally masculine and caretaker roles is vital for father involvement as well as child academic success (Fischer & Anderson, 2012; Kim & Hill, 2015; Mueller & Buckley, 2014).

Altering communication stereotypes and methods are also key areas in which school counselors could advocate for SAHDs. With most of the participants noting difficulties with gender-based issues in communication between the school and parents, the school counselor could address changes in traditional ideologies in communicating with parents, especially for SAHDs (Hart, 2011; Panscofar et al., 2017; Terriquez, 2013). For example, the school counselor could educate all school personnel on the inclusion of fathers in all school-based communication experiences (e.g., emails, conferences, phone calls, etc.). In addition, the school counselor could advocate for the protocol that all personnel review and respect the wishes of parents regarding the appropriate person to contact for information, emergencies, etc. rather than making gender-based decision on communication decisions. A final communication aspect simply involves maintaining lines of communication with SAHDs for check-ins and updates, even those not involving problem situations.

A second area of assistance that elementary school counselors could address with SAHDs includes providing resources to school stakeholders and the community. For example, SAHDs noted a need to continue educating the populous about the prevalence and acceptance of SAHDs (da Silva, 2014; Donaldson et al., 2011; Kramer & Kramer, 2016; Rochlen et al., 2010). Many of the participants in this study noted a

lack of resources and advocacy for the SAHDs in the United States. SAHDs of diverse backgrounds tend to have a particular need for these fundamentals (Baker, 2014; Liong, 2017; Terraquez, 2013). Elementary school counselors could address this need in the school setting by providing information through brochures, professional development opportunities, and community engagement to enhance the awareness and knowledge of the roles of SAHDs in the school setting. Addressing this lack of knowledge can be essential at the elementary-school level to counteract some the socially-based stereotypes of traditional work and caregiver roles (Chelsey & Flood, 2017; Liong, 2017; Tinsley et al., 2015).

A final component needed by the participants was increased support from the school. School counselors are in a strategic role to provide potential counseling-based services for all school stakeholders, including SAHDs (ASCA, 2012). Several of the participants discussed their desire for school-based opportunities to discuss their experiences and concerns about their roles as SAHDs in their children's education. Providing such opportunities (e.g., support groups, SAHD networks, etc.) could supply the SAHDs with needed counseling support as well as demonstrate the school's support and desire to include them in their children's educational progress (Fischer & Anderson, 2012; Terriquez, 2013). It could also be useful for school counselors to be made aware of community-based resources (e.g., At-Home Dad Network, social media groups, etc.). These resources that school counselors may be challenged to provide, given their large caseloads and extracurricular duties, may provide additional support and education for SAHDs (ASCA, 2012; Beale, 1999). Finally, school counselors can provide events, information, and resources related to self-care, which may provide a vital component to

the overall health of SAHDs. Improved self-care and overall health may result in increased quality of involvement and engagement in their children's elementary school experiences (da Silva, 2014; Englar-Carlson & Kiselica, 2013; Heppner & Heppner, 2009; Latshaw & Hale, 2016).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Several limitations were present in this research study. In this type of qualitative methodology, generalizability is typically not expected. Instead, the objective is to provide a quality exploration of the experience and perceptions of the participants. Results may also be limited because of the collection of data solely from a volunteer self-selection set of SAHDs specifically associated with the Stay-At-Home Dads Network. Finally, in this style of qualitative inquiry, the data analysis follows a thorough and clear process; however, there is still potential for a preconceived bias to exist by the researchers that could have affected the analysis. These limitations are meant to serve as a starting point for future exploration and research. For instance, additional studies investigating a larger sample size could provide more diverse participants and responses. Additionally, the inclusion of school stakeholders such as teachers, students, and staff in the interview process could enhance the perceptions and experiences of those interacting with SAHDs in the school setting.

### **Conclusion**

The goal of this research was to understand SAHDs' experiences and their interactions with their children's elementary schools. Based on the results, the researchers found a need for additional communication, resources, and support for both SAHDs and school stakeholders. This resulting knowledge can be utilized in developing

more inclusive and supportive elementary school environments for SAHDs, their children, and school stakeholders to enhance the academic and social climate.

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