THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF FATHERLESSNESS IN MALE ADOLESCENTS:

THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

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**Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives, attitudes, and perceptions of former adolescents who were without a father figure in the home during their high school years. The goals of this study were to (a) identify the challenges encountered by the young men during their lived experiences, (b) glean insights from males on the phenomenon of father absence, and (c) utilize the perspectives of the males to aid schools in providing solutions for students and school systems. This research gained the perspective of the young men who have first-hand experience in coping with father absence. It is hoped that this research provides insight into the challenges that these students face and reveals perspectives from the adolescent male that can be used to help teenagers in similar situations. These perspectives may also help teachers and schools realize how they are already helping and identify areas where more could be done. This information could lead to solutions that not only benefit schools but society as a whole.

**Design and Analysis**

To identify and understand the perspectives, attitudes, and perceptions of the young men, the study utilized a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach. The major data collection method was three in-depth interviews. The appropriateness of this research design is underscored by its ability to explain, to understand, and to assign meaning to experiences from the perspective of those who are directly involved (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; van Manen, 1990).

To analyze the data, I used a combination of stages suggested by Ary et al. (2006) and Moustakas (1994). This combination of approaches provided a systematic approach for analysis. The first step in data analysis involved familiarization and organization. Following each interview, the audio recording was transcribed. Familiarization with the transcripts began by
reading and rereading them. While reading the transcripts, a reflective log was kept. This helped me capture thoughts and ideas as they occurred (Ary et al., 2006). These notes and thoughts included potential coding categories, possible themes, and additional interview questions.

After familiarizing and organizing the data, I began the coding and recoding process. This process involved categorizing and recognizing common words, ideas, thoughts, and feelings that appeared throughout the interviews. To determine the requisite codes for the study, an initial broad coding strategy was used. This type of coding—referred to as open coding—helped put the data into preliminary categories. Open coding involved tagging any unit of data that might be relevant to the study (Merriam, 2009). Selected passages with the appropriate code were tagged throughout the data using NVivo 10. The goal for open coding was to establish codes that provided a reconstruction of the collected data (Ary et al., 2006).

After open coding, axial coding occurred. This is the process of grouping open codes into more specific categories and relating categories and properties to each other (Merriam, 2009). Axial coding occurs when the researcher makes connections between and across the preliminary categories that were established during open coding (Ary et al., 2006). This part of analysis required simplifying and reducing the data that appeared in the open coding categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Axial coding revealed categories such as effects of fatherlessness on behavior, effects of fatherlessness on academics, effects of fatherlessness on social-emotional development, idea of a father, influences of role models, and suggestions for school interventions. NVivo 10 helped keep track of the frequency that a code appeared. The frequency at which certain codes appeared gave some insight into the significance of that category (Ary et al., 2006). Coding was
completed when all the events were classified, categories were saturated, and there were sufficient numbers of regularities (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Axial coding helped reduce the data and led to common themes. Themes helped link categories together by looking at common ideas across categories. These themes provided answers to the research questions (Merriam, 2009). Van Manen (1990) stated “Theme gives control and order to our research and writing” (p. 79).

The established themes were used to develop a textural description, a structural description, and a combined structural-textural description. A textural description explains what each of the participants experienced. This includes verbatim examples from answering the question “what happened?” A structural description of experiences includes conditions, situations, and context, which, in this study, revolved around adolescents’ families, peers, role models and mentors, teachers, and other leaders in a high school setting. The structural description answered “how” the phenomenon was experienced.

A combined textural-structural or synthesis description incorporated both the textural and structural descriptions. This description helped to inform the essence of the experience of living without a father figure during the high school years (Creswell, 1998). Creswell (2007) stated, “This [synthesis description] is the ‘essence’ of the experience and represents the culminating aspect of a phenomenology study” (p. 159). The combined textural-structural description gives the experience meaning.

**Conclusion**

The results of this study concluded that the absence of a father at home during high school has an impact on male adolescents. The degree of the impact is determined by the strength of attachment the teenager has with his mother and father and the relationships he
establishes with other influences. The stronger these attachments and relationships, more needs are met, resulting in an absent father having less of a negative emotional and behavioral impact.

There are some specific needs that male adolescents expect their fathers to meet. When their father is absent or unavailable, it is left up to the mother and other influences to help meet these needs. When the mother or another influence meets these needs, they may not have the same impact as if a father had met them.