

10-1-2023

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### Recommended Citation


Coker, J. M. & Panerosa, F. (2023). Broodmother: What the Lack of Bathroom Breaks Reveals About Dehumanizing Teachers. In J. DeHart (Ed.), *Phenomenological Studies in Education* (pp. 163-181). IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-8276-6.ch009>. Available at <https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/educational-leadership/1/>.

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## Chapter 9

# Broodmother: What the Lack of Bathroom Breaks Reveals About Dehumanizing Teachers

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter asks, “What is it like to be a public school teacher in a school that doesn’t allow for adequate bathroom breaks?” Using van Manen’s interpretive phenomenological methodology, the authors analyzed interviews from nine participants to create an empathetic portrayal of teachers who have inadequate bathroom breaks. These experiences were then distilled into a series of insights through the concept of “broodmothering.” These broodmothers deny their own physical and mental needs in the interest of supervising children, and show a profession burdened by increasing parentification and dehumanization of teachers. After connecting this phenomenon to larger issues in the profession, the authors also posited potential solutions for educational decision makers to provide an environment that helps these “broodmothers” leave their proverbial nests.*

*Bridget (pseudonym): I got a job at a Title I middle school, and it was rough. Turns out that only a small part of the job was about delivering curriculum. I would turn around to write on the board and students would start beating each other up. And all of this is on top of answering 47 phone calls, taking attendance, making sure the lesson plans are ready and posted, and fixing technology that never seems to work. I woke up at 5:45 in the morning and didn’t go home until 5:00 at night. Look, I was happy to do the thousands of things I shuffled through in a day, and spin plates and juggle fire, and all the things that teachers do in a day. But could I just use the bathroom please?*

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-8276-6.ch009

## INTRODUCTION

The “teacher bathroom dilemma” refers to the idea that teachers do not have adequate bathroom breaks (Coker, 2022, p. 5). As Bridget described in the above quote, teachers are simultaneously burdened by the sheer number of things they must do, while also feeling they cannot leave the classroom for even a moment out of fear of what will happen while their backs are turned. Teachers in schools where class sizes are larger, such as Title 1 schools, feel there is even greater danger to stepping away for a moment, even if it is to meet the basic biological need of going to the bathroom.

Bridget’s situation is far from unique. A national survey in 2015 found almost half of all teachers in America reported not having adequate bathroom breaks (American Federation of Teachers, 2015). Despite the ubiquity of this issue, there have only been only a handful of studies on this topic (Coker, 2022; Kovač et al., 2013; Kovess-Masféty et al., 2006; Liao et al., 2006; Nygaard & Linder, 1997).

The first scholarly mention of inadequate teacher bathroom breaks occurred in Apple’s (1988) *Teachers and Texts: A Political Economy of Class and Gender Relations in Education*:

*Intensification represents one of the most tangible ways in which the work privileges of educational workers are eroded. It has many symptoms from the trivial to the more complex ranging from no time at all to even go to the bathroom, have a copy of coffee or relax, to having a total absence of time to keep up with one’s field (p. 188).*

While brief, it was the first time someone had described this aspect of a teacher’s work experience. Almost a decade later, Nygaard & Linder (1997) completed the first empirical study on teacher bathroom habits by surveying almost 800 female teachers in two large midwestern school districts. More than 84% reported inadequate bathroom breaks were a problem, and almost half reported that they intentionally dehydrated to reduce their bathroom usage. Since then, other studies have continued to show that teachers suffer from higher rates of lower urinary tract symptoms, including a survey of French teachers (Kovess-Masféty et al., 2006), Taiwanese elementary school teachers (Liao et al., 2008), and Slovenian physical education teachers (Kovač et al., 2013). One mixed methods study interviewed a British science teacher who left the profession due to these inadequate bathroom breaks (Evans, 2007). The most recent study on this topic surveyed over 800 US teachers and found that teachers with inadequate bathroom access risked renal and cardiovascular health (Winchester, et al., 2023). This topic has been explored qualitatively with only one study (Coker, 2022), and to date there have been no studies that use phenomenology to explore the experiences of teachers with inadequate bathroom breaks.

Our interpretive phenomenological study of this issue has shown the teacher bathroom dilemma parentifies and dehumanizes teachers by changing them into something else, a phenomenon we call “broodmothering.” While the circumstances of their occupation provide fertile ground for the production of broodmothers, the teachers themselves must first engage in an active process of prioritizing students’ needs above their own, strategizing for bathroom breaks, changing their clothing choices, and dehydrating before their transformation into a broodmother can be complete. We contend that any teacher, regardless of their gender identity, can transform into a broodmother, as the phenomenon involves the changing of habits by teachers in a particular occupational context. This chapter explains how teachers change into broodmothers and how this transformation impacts various aspects of their lives, including their relationships with students.

## METHODOLOGY

### Why Phenomenology?

Given the sensitive subject matter, we wanted to ensure that we would treat our participants' stories ethically. Our previous engagement with this research was through Jonathan Coker's (2022) dissertation. In his dissertation, he concluded that the neoliberal turn in education changed teacher working conditions, so that teachers were exploited (Coker, 2022). This further emphasized our need to find a methodology that treated our participants with care, so we did not reproduce any systems of exploitation. Phenomenology worked for this inquiry as a methodology because it prioritized a caring orientation to participants through vivid and individualized accounts of their experiences.

Our chosen methodology of phenomenology transports readers into the world of our participants through rich examples. What's important is that the selected example accesses an aspect of lived reality that is familiar enough so that anyone can relate. These rich examples transport the reader by giving relatable accounts of a participant's lived experience. With an immersive enough example, even those of us without the lived experience can identify with it. This allows for an empathetic understanding, a key strength of phenomenology (van Manen, 2015; van Manen, 2017a).

This empathetic understanding was exactly what we wanted because it allowed our readers to identify with the situation rather than convince them of the truth value of our argument via proof. While proof is often valued over subjective experience, proof can be called into question. Thus, we sought a methodology that would inspire recognition of a phenomenon rather than justification that the phenomenon exists. Moving our reader out of the mindset of having to prove or disprove the truth value of a claim may make them more receptive, a quality that we highly value given the resistance that this topic faces as an intellectual inquiry. This resistance has been defined by the common argument of "what about the children," which often derails any discussion of teacher working conditions (Edelman, 2004). Other researchers have successfully applied phenomenology to teachers' lives in order to elicit this type of empathetic understanding (Dehart and Dunn, 2020; McGregor, 2020).

Phenomenology's use of more open-ended research questions allows for results that can surprise us, rather than simply confirming a preconception (van Manen, 2017a). When choosing the type of phenomenology that would be best suited to our research, we consulted Vagle's (2018) book. Through Vagle, we found van Manen's methodology as ideal given its open-ended approach to data analysis. The goal of hermeneutic phenomenology like van Manen's is to remain open to possibilities within the data rather than reducing the data to essences. While descriptive phenomenology (e.g., Husserl) attempts to get to "the things themselves" through reduction or conceptualizing the data in order to create a definition of the phenomenon, as a hermeneutic phenomenologist, van Manen advocated for an "openness" to the phenomena (Laverty, 2003; van Manen, 2017a).

To start this process of "openness," we began with our reflexivity. In hermeneutic phenomenology, the purpose of reflexivity is to create a receptivity to the phenomenon by drawing upon personal experiences, rather than bracketing them away like descriptive phenomenology requires (Horrigan-Kelly, Millar, & Dowling, 2016; Laverty, 2003). Both authors have differing levels of personal experience with the phenomenon, with Jonathan being a former K-12 teacher having experienced the issue, and Francesca teaching in a less traditional setting where this issue was not present. This contrast between our personal experiences allowed us to remain open to a greater variety of interpretations of the data, while also having enough personal experience with the topic to create relatable content. We define the

content as relatable if it fulfills van Manen's (2017a) criteria of creating rich examples from the data that elicit the "phenomenological nod" of implicit recognition (Munhall, 1994).

## **Particulars of this Study**

Consistent with typical phenomenological designs, we had a small number of participants with in-depth interviews (Groenewald, 2004). Our research question was: What is it like to be a public-school teacher in a school that doesn't allow for adequate bathroom breaks? Jonathan interviewed nine public school teachers who self-identified that they had inadequate time for the bathroom. These teachers came from various geographical regions in the United States, including the Southeast, the Northeast, and the Midwest, ranged in experience from novice to veteran, and varied by grade level taught including elementary, middle, and high school. There were eight women and one man. Jonathan conducted semi-structured interviews. This involved two to three in-depth conversations each, with 100 pages of transcripts per participant. IRB approval was obtained.

## **Analysis Process**

The process of analysis began with Jonathan sharing de-identified transcripts with participants as a form of member checking. Participants then edited anything that did not capture what they wanted to say and/or added to the transcript things that they felt were missing. While the use of member checking has been occasionally contested in phenomenological studies, it can be a necessary component if the researchers provide sound reasoning for its use (Birt, et al., 2016). Since participants for this study knew ahead of time that member checking would be done, it allowed them to share more freely of themselves about the sensitive and sometimes embarrassing topic of bathroom usage. They were likely more forthright and less inhibited than they would have been, since they knew they had the option to edit themselves later.

Once all transcripts were finalized, we used the practice of locating "phenomenological insights" (van Manen, 2017a). To engage in this process, the two investigators met twice a week over the course of four months. Fortunately, we were friends who did not mind spending a lot of time together immersed in a common goal. During these meetings, we repeatedly read participant interviews and took open notes on whatever we noticed, disciplining ourselves to remain "open" to the data for each round of notetaking. We looked for common themes amongst the participants as well as highly individualized stories that added multifacetedness to the data. We then had in-depth discussions with one another to contrast and compare our interpretations. While Francesca had a deeper background in philosophy, Jonathan had more experience in education and qualitative research. Throughout this process, we also were reading various phenomenological method papers, as well as empirical studies, to ensure our readings of the interviews were truly grounded in our methodology. This gave us a common vocabulary to challenge one another's interpretations of the data.

Next, we mined the data for anecdotes, rich examples, and stories that supported our emerging interpretations and discussed any insights that emerged. We then created a conceptual outline of these rich examples to help us interpret what we had found. As we were doing this, we noticed that there was a certain persona that arose from all of these teachers' stories. They all conformed to certain necessary tactics and norms that contrasted with what one would expect from being a teacher. Along the way, we interpreted each quote to make the concept both understandable and emotionally stirring to the reader.

## **Broodmother**

*Figure 1. Octopus painting created by Jonathan*



Finally, we formatted our quotes, stories, etc., to create the arc that best represented our “insight” of broodmothering (van Manen, 2017a).

### **Introducing the Broodmother**

While reading various phenomenological papers, we found ourselves contemplating our central concept. We continued to notice in our data a repeating pattern of teachers feeling parentified. During a phone meeting between the researchers, Francesca turned to look at an octopus painting on her wall (Figure 1). Jonathan had painted it for her as a gift, because he knew she liked octopi. We began talking about the octopus and a documentary by Sir David Attenborough that mentioned the type of parents they are.

Octopus mothers will starve themselves while protecting their brood of eggs, so they never leave them unprotected. Jonathan mentioned that sometimes an octopus will even eat its own arm when the starvation becomes too much for her. This self-denial of bodily needs to the point of self-destructive behaviors, born out of an altruistic caring for the young, reminded us of the plight of our teacher-participants. They described themselves as feeling dehumanized and parentified. Hence, our central concept was born: “broodmother.”

To fully appreciate the term, we dug into the definition and etymology, beginning first with the definition of brood. We found that “to brood” was defined as “to hover over or protect (offspring, etc.)” (Webster’s New World College Dictionary, 2004). Etymologically, brood comes from the Old English *brod*, which means “offspring of egg-laying animals, hatchlings, young birds hatched in one nest” (Harper, n.d.). This provided an animal connotation to our term. Then, we found that brood adopted a figurative meaning in 15th-century English, to “meditate long and anxiously (to incubate in the mind),” as well as its use in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), “to dwell moodily.” This definition added the idea to our term that broodmothering was a state of being, so it could also be used as a verb. Finally, we found that in modern usage by the 1980s, “brood” could mean “full of maternal yearning” (Harper, n.d.). We clarified our intention with this term by adding the word “mother.” Thus, the term could simultaneously relate to animalistic characteristics, be associated with watching over children, describe a state of being, and connote parenthood.

## **Background**

Before we can fully engage with our phenomenon of broodmothering, we need to explore the history of this phenomenon. The practice of historicizing a phenomenon was advocated for by Heidegger, a foundational philosopher for interpretative phenomenology.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1927/2008) used the word *Dasein* [being there] to describe what it’s like to be human. The concept of *Dasein* refers to an entity (a human) that has the ability to examine its own history, contextualize itself as existing in the present and understand its future, or more morbidly, understand the certainty of its own inevitable death. The fact that humans exist in this temporal way illustrates the importance of why we need to place humans in their context, and we do this through historicity.

Historicity refers to the idea that humans are situated in a socio-cultural-historical context that shapes our understanding of the world around us. Since we are so fully embedded in this context, we can never make ourselves fully aware of it, because we can never step outside of it (Heidegger, 1927/2008). To paraphrase a cliché, a fish rarely understands the water in which it swims. Methodologically, researchers wishing to engage in interpretative phenomenology can use the historicity of a phenomenon to help explain and even shape their interpretation of the data (Lavery, 2003).

For the historicity of broodmothering, we looked into the history of teaching in the United States and found a rich literature connecting the profession to the role of mothering. Boyle’s (2004) well-known article on the feminization of the teaching profession traced the history of teachers back to the colonial period and explained that a teacher during that time was a man paid privately to teach a group of children at a schoolhouse or as a personal tutor. Since teaching was seen as a low-status profession, schools often had trouble finding male teachers and would reluctantly hire female teachers only when no males were available (McClelland, 1992). Horace Mann, who is commonly credited as a founder of modern public education in the United States, saw an opportunity to hire women workers as teachers:

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*God seems to have made woman peculiarly suited to guide and develop the infant mind, and it seems... very poor policy to pay a man 20 or 22 dollars a month, for teaching children the ABCs, when a female could do the work more successfully at one third of the price. (Littleton School Committee, Littleton, Massachusetts, 1849).*

Horace Mann essentialized women as nurturers, while he simultaneously redefined teaching as a nurturing profession. By defining teaching as women's work, he also laid the groundwork for treating teaching as a lower-paid profession. Through his assertion that women are innate nurturers, Mann also cemented the idea in the American consciousness that lower teacher pay was warranted because nurturing is an unskilled form of labor.

Mann's campaign for women teachers was obviously successful. Spencer (2000) writes, "By 1860, teachers in the United States were predominantly female, a pattern that has continued until the present time." The connection between women as mothers and defining the teaching profession as mothering persisted. In fact, Spencer (2000) writes that actual motherly duties were seen as a distraction from teaching to the point that teachers were prohibited from marrying, as this would keep them from their professional obligations to teach/mother children in the school. Women who became teachers were expected not only to adhere to this prohibition, but many others regarding their social behaviors such as "no dancing, card playing, swearing, smoking, or drinking, [and limitations on] what they wore, and how they acted" (Spencer, 2000, p. 56). Thus, teaching was never just a job for these women, but a role that encompassed their entire lives. Many of these restrictions were not lifted until after World War II, as the baby boom created a much higher demand for teachers (Spencer, 2000).

The teacher-as-mother concept continued to persist as a tradition to the point that by the 1970s, the "motherteacher" was blamed for the failure of the American schools (Schmude and Jackisch, 2019). The feminization of teaching and the depiction of teaching as mothering is now so entrenched in American culture that men who enter the profession report feeling that their masculinity is challenged by taking on the role of teacher (Simpson, 2004). This brings us to the current moment. As Heidegger explains about tracing a tradition through historicity, "Its own past—and this always means the past of its 'generation'—is not something which *follows along after* Dasein, but something which already goes ahead of it" (Heidegger, 1927/2008, p. 20).

Examining the traditions that shaped the teaching profession revealed the culturally embedded views we have about teachers. It provided useful information that aided our understanding of the nature of what it means to be a teacher in our time, because the historicity shapes our expectation of what a teacher should be. Though teachers are no longer required to remain unmarried or refrain from specific "immoral" pastimes, the expectation that a teacher be both nurturing and moral in nature still remains. We must acknowledge how ingrained this tradition is in order to even understand what can be changed.

## **RESULTS**

### **Congratulations, It's a Brood!**

Teachers were often compared to parents because they were considered responsible for a child's well-being and safety. One participant by the name of Carmen described this responsibility:



*Part of it's what you sign up for when educating kids, but you're also just factually, in charge of their physical and mental wellbeing while educating them. And nothing can happen to them under your watch. In loco parentis, right?*

Notice the legal language that Carmen used to describe the responsibilities of a teacher. It both parentified teachers and legalized the relationship between teacher and student in a way that could feel threatening for a teacher. In fact, many teachers live in fear of failing to fulfill this parental role both in terms of what might happen to students as well as possible professional consequences. For instance, Jeff described:

*For minors, you need to be in there. Because if they get injured, and there's not a teacher supervising them, heads are gonna roll.*

Jeff drew a direct connection between teacher supervision and student injury by implying that one led to the other. He further emphasized his own fear of what might happen to himself professionally with his “heads are gonna roll” comment.

While this expectation of student supervision may seem a standard practice for teachers, the lack of a break for teachers from this responsibility becomes problematic when they need to tend to their personal needs. As Mary explained, she found herself at the crossroads of not being able to leave while navigating the need to use the bathroom:

*Don't leave the kids unattended. Basically, you're responsible for the children. So if something happens in your absence, then you have a problem. If a student gets injured, severely injured, and the parent wants to sue, they would look more at the teacher being at fault, because the teacher wasn't in the room to control the incident. I do believe there would be a consequence if some student severely got hurt to the point where medical care was needed. A parent would say, "Where was the teacher?" And then of course, the principal would have to explain, "Oh, the teacher decided to leave the room." I don't know if the restroom would be excusable. But in my book, it would be excusable, because I wasn't out party-ing, I was using the restroom.*

Mary's testimony described a situation where a teacher's needs are in direct conflict with that of the student's. The combination of having urgent needs in the midst of these responsibilities creates an atmosphere of anxiety for teachers that is difficult, if not impossible, for them to resolve without either sacrificing the children's needs or their own. While parents often delay or even sacrifice meeting their own physical needs for their child's, those working with children may find this a surprising expectation. Parents only care for a few children, but teachers must care for a large “brood of children” (sometimes more than 30 per class) which distorts this expectation to unreasonable and even impossible proportions.

## **Always Brooding**

Just as broodmothers never take a break from caring for their young, so are teachers constantly monitoring students with little to no breaks. As previously established, teachers feel they must never leave students alone under any circumstance, even when this contradicts their own needs. While this may seem like a reasonable expectation for safety, the lived reality of that expectation is that teachers must work long

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swaths of time without a break due to their schedules. The schedule dictates when a teacher can and cannot leave the classroom. Bridget detailed her schedule:

*There were those long stretches where I had to watch the kids and I couldn't step away. So sometimes the last chance I would have to use the bathroom would be 7:30 in the morning. So if I had kids in Homeroom, that was my last chance before that 7:30 bell rang. What that meant was that I could be responsible for kids from 7:30 to 11:30, or maybe even beyond with absolutely no breaks. No breaks! We were expected to be present during transitions and everything. When I started teaching, I would know if it was like 11 o'clock or 11:30 because I was about to bust. We were told by administrators, "Your planning periods are not sacred." And we were told by administrators, "Your lunch breaks are not duty free."*

Carmen echoed Bridget's issue with lunch time not being a break from teacher responsibilities:

*But also as someone who's responsible for watching students during lunch, it is very difficult to go to the bathroom. So it's lunchtime: you are trying to go to the cafeteria and make sure everyone's doing what they need to do in the cafeteria, but also finding a way to go to the bathroom. But you also need to go [to the bathroom] when your team's NOT going either, so that there are always people watching the kids in the cafeteria. Even though there are four adult restrooms in the building, that's not enough during lunchtime, right? It kind of creates a line situation.*

Planning periods are not predictable breaks either due to additional responsibilities such as meetings or quirks of the schedule. Jeff even felt nostalgia for "COVID-teaching" for this reason:

*I can't use it [the bathroom] during my planning period, because it changes every day. We do a waterfall schedule, no pun intended. So you get your first block class at the beginning one week, then later in the day during the next week, and so on and so on. As a result, your planning block is at a different time of day every week. You can't count on it as a bathroom break. (sigh) It makes me miss COVID-teaching when we were all at home. I could use the bathroom just by hitting pause.*

The lack of a bathroom break may even extend beyond the school day. As Carmen explained, teachers often have responsibilities immediately after school that prevent them from taking even a momentary break for the bathroom:

*And then after that at 1:45, I have my last class of the day with sixth graders. After that ends, I will go right into a 20 minute duty of monitoring students during dismissal.*

As a result of these tight schedules with little to no breaks, broodmothering requires a constant mental awareness of the schedule. Or as Mila put it,

*In every situation I've been in as a classroom teacher in elementary school, it's never that you can just really go. In order to pee, we have to strategize.*

This need for high level strategizing is something that is unique to the teaching profession, as Gloria described:

*You have to plan around it. I see it almost as going on a long trip in a car. You have to plan where you're going to go. So I feel the same thing about teaching and using the bathroom because I do have to plan. And I've never had a job where I had to plan like that.*

Gloria's description of teaching as akin to planning a daily road trip painted a picture of the profession as arduous and difficult. But once teachers align themselves to this arduous schedule and mental state, they can operate almost on instinct by developing a routine, as Jeff mentioned:

*I get into it. I mean, I'm in a routine now where I don't think about it. But I got to plan, so that I don't get stuck.*

Jeff described it as being "stuck," which suggests an almost animalistic instinct to avoid feeling trapped. The routine must be maintained for both Jeff and his "clutch of eggs" to be safe.

This routine begins even before the school year begins, where the teachers, like Mary, must start changing their bodies' rhythms:

*But then as soon as school starts or right before school starts, I'm thinking Oh, you got to train your bladder. Gotta get ready. Gotta get ready. Can't go when you want to.*

Even the best routines and training will fail, which requires teachers to ask other teachers for help as Elizabeth described:

*If I've got kids in my room, I have to call another teacher from down the hallway, and ask her if she can cover both of our classes for me to go. And so if she can, then she stands kind of in the hallway in-between our two rooms and listens out for both. And vice versa. If she needs to go, she calls me and I sit in the hallway between our two classes.*

Elizabeth's description showed that broodmothering shifted a teacher's job responsibilities from facilitating learning to simply monitoring large broods of children, so other teachers can take a break for only a moment.

## **Metamorphosis**

### **Dressing to Undress**

The act of broodmothering required a change in clothing. When teachers did get a bathroom break, their time was limited. To maneuver these tight schedules, they often modified their wardrobes to speed up the process. While the schedule changed teacher bathroom access, the schedule was outside of a teacher's control. A teacher modifying their own clothing signified the first steps that they took to fit within these demands by changing themselves. As Bridget indicated, teachers had to change not only their clothing, but also how they thought of their clothing and how it should function:

*What I was wearing for the day had a huge impact on how quickly I could get in and out of the bathroom. When I was wearing tights or a shirt I had to tuck in, where I'm thinking about having to...It's like a lot*

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*of just going through the steps in your mind, before you even get there so that you can be as efficient as you possibly can in the short amount of time that you have. It sounds ridiculous, but I was putting a lot of thought into going to the bathroom.*

The consequences of not selecting the right clothing are often at the forefront of teachers' minds, even while getting dressed in the morning. Dressing means not just thinking about your clothing differently; it also requires selecting clothing that could accommodate any necessary quick changes. As one participant, Anna, described, *"I'm not taking my time. It's like, go as fast as you can. I wear skirts instead of pants, because it's faster."* Sue provided a cautionary tale and explained how it affected her clothing choices for quick bathroom breaks:

*I had a colleague who one time, she went in and she had pantyhose. And she had to go in and out so quickly that her skirt was inside her pantyhose, and she walked out in the hallway like that. Obviously somebody noticed it, not too many people, but everybody found out about it. Poor gal didn't live it down for a very long time. But you're trying to get in and out so fast sometimes, you know? Toilet paper on a foot is nothing compared to that. You have to be a little more conscious about what you're wearing, if you're gonna need to get in and out of it fast.*

Teachers have changed how they think about their clothing, dressing for speed, and dressing to avoid embarrassing situations. In addition, teachers must still consider how to dress for the weather in a way that is suitable for quick bathroom access. As Gloria described:

*I don't wear things that are tucked in, because that takes too much time. I do try to streamline my clothing, so it's easy in and out. I usually will try pants. If I don't have to wear tights, like if it's warm, a skirt is easy, a dress is easy. But in the winter, if I have to wear tights, that's different, because you got to make sure they go back up. And when you pull them up, you want to make sure you don't have a run in them.*

While teacher dress codes vary from school to school, there is a clear learning curve that involves discomfort, haste and sometimes humiliation, leading to a "dress code within a dress code" based on negative experiences. Teachers measured their own success at negotiating these impositions by the level of relative comfort they could achieve. Sue achieved success by dressing more casually:

*If I had a suit on, and I had pantyhose and a skirt, it was just awful to try to get it off, you know? Leggings were the best thing to wear. And actually a skirt was okay, if I didn't have to wear hose that day, a skirt was okay. But leggings were really much better, because you don't have to zip them up, you know? And if you got something that's a little tight, forget it.*

Unfortunately, other teachers like Bridget didn't have the luxury of dressing more casually to accommodate the quick change needed for the bathroom:

*I support dress codes. I understand the point, they want teachers to look professional. But at the same time, I am on my feet all day, right? Because that's an expectation. It is literally part of our evaluation rubric in my county, or excuse me in South Carolina, that we were expected to be constantly walking*

*around the classroom. Not only that, if I have to wait a long time to use the bathroom, I'd like to be wearing something comfortable that's not squishing my bladder any more than it's already squishy.*

Bridget's description showed not only how she dressed in clothing that was difficult to get in and out of, but she also dressed in a way that she knew would make her uncomfortable. The clothing pinched or squeezed her bladder while she was trying to hold it.

Some teachers may even change their personal style preferences to meet the demands imposed by restricted bathroom access, as Mary noted here:

*I am conscious of that when I lay out my outfits. I generally wear a belt, and I've always worn one. I have one on today. But there was a time when I was trying to get to the bathroom today, I was like, "I really should just stop wearing belts." Because I don't want to come out wet. So I'm thinking about that for the next school year. And I'm really thinking about just getting elastic pants, because it's probably easier for me to just pull them up and down, so I don't have to worry about unbuckling a belt. I thought about wearing dresses, because it's easier to pull up skirts, you know? But I'm not a big dress wearer.*

With Mary's example, we can see how the bathroom dilemma conflicts with clothing choices relating to personal identity. Mary's comment, "*I thought about wearing dresses...But I'm not a big dress wearer,*" illustrated how teachers compromise personal style for expediency.

All of these teachers began their careers conforming to a dress code while maintaining their own personal style. After experiencing discomfort, unmet time constraints and humiliation they have developed a habit of "dressing for undressing." A teacher is expected to look the part of a professional while also actively engaging with a room full of students, and often with a full bladder.

## Dehydration

Sacrificing personal style is only the beginning. The transformation intensifies with teachers dehydrating. Jeff described the problem:

*I don't drink a lot of fluids during the day on purpose. I'm drinking less water, less coffee, whatever, because I don't have a lot of time to use the bathroom.*

So while teachers adjust their routines, train their bladders, and even change their wardrobe, it is still not enough. Many teachers have resorted to the only action they have left: dehydrating. However, this dehydration requires practice, as Mary noted:

*Like I said, I can only speak for me. But I do think that we, as teachers have programmed ourselves to drink. (Pointing to water bottle) This will be the only intake for me. This is a 24 ounce bottle. And I have this much left of it. That's the only thing I will drink for the whole day. And this is how much water I've drank for the day (holds up 24 ounce water bottle with 1/3 of the water remaining).*

Mary's disturbing description of rationing water paints a grim picture for how teachers are treating their bodies. Obviously, this is not enough water for anyone during the day, much less a working profes-

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sional, especially one with the physical and vocal demands of a teacher. Carmen made this point when she compared her professional experience to that of her husband's:

*I would love to be one of those people that is like, "I'm gonna drink all the water, and I'm gonna be so healthy." I can't do that! I can't drink a gallon of water a day! I'd be torturing myself, which sucks. My husband can drink all the water he wants, and go to the bathroom whenever he wants at his job, right? Because he works for parts distribution at a car dealership. He's in the warehouse, and he's walking around, but he doesn't have to watch 20 kids, and he can go and drink all the water he wants. So it's also just the nature of the profession. Because I go 1,2,3,4 class periods without a break. I would love to drink a lot more water, and I would, if I knew I could go to the bathroom whenever I wanted. I feel like some of that dignity would be there. I would just feel taken care of! I would feel like someone is really going out of their way to make sure that your human experience and human needs are met, as opposed to, "Figure it out. Good luck."*

Here, Carmen summarized how the loss of one bodily need, going to the bathroom, leads to the loss of another bodily need, drinking water. She was conscious of the negative health effects of dehydrating, but felt that she had no other choice just by "the nature of the profession." Perhaps, the most noteworthy part of Carmen's description was that she said if someone were to give her the ability to meet this most basic need, it would be "really going out of their way." The prolonged exposure to these working conditions left Carmen feeling so dehumanized that she imagined any relief as a type of benevolence from her employer.

While teachers are conditioned to ignore their bodily needs for the sake of their jobs, Elizabeth described how this impacted the rest of her health:

*Even while pregnant, I'm not hydrating as much as I need to, because I'm worried I'm going to have to step away to the bathroom. And it makes me feel more tired easily and more prone to headaches, when I don't drink enough water. I try to power through the day, and leave as quickly as possible. And then I get home and nap and drink tons of water. So, I'm just delaying my hydration. Definitely means for me that I tend to drink a lot more water at home. And so I urinate more at home than I do at work. And one of the problems with pregnancy is if you drink a lot in the afternoons or the evening, you wake up more during the night to go to the bathroom. So it's definitely impacting the quality of my sleep right now. So there's actually a lot of advice in a lot of pregnancy books to not drink so much at night, but to drink your ounces of water during the day so that you have a better shot at sleeping through the night. But it just doesn't work with my work schedule at all...at least I get paid.*

As we mentioned previously, denying one bodily need (using the bathroom) can have a domino effect on denying other needs. For Elizabeth, this meant headaches and poor sleep. Dehydration can cause headaches, and certainly delaying drinking water until the evening can disrupt a person's sleep patterns especially if they are pregnant. Elizabeth's quote showed that teachers consciously make unhealthy choices just to meet the demands of a job. Elizabeth's final words of "at least I get paid" encapsulate her exhaustion and reduce teaching to a way to earn a wage. Elizabeth showed disturbing acceptance that the job would inevitably damage her body and that this bodily damage must be tolerated in the interest of her monetary needs.

## Full Broodmother

The teachers in our study were tasked with never leaving students unattended while working schedules that left little to no time for breaks. While they strategized, changed their clothing, and dehydrated to cope, it ultimately led to the same inevitable conclusion of psychological and physical changes in teachers. Mary explained how this changed her relationship with her body:

*I keep my body at school like a stepchild. Well, I don't even want to say a stepchild because people treat their stepchildren better. (Laughs) I treat mine like Cinderella. I'm not as nice to myself when it comes to using the bathroom at work as I am at home. So summer, weekends, I'm good. I probably would have been on my second bottle or third bottle of water, even had a sweet tea by then. Now I'm like, "Oh, no, we can't do that, because you got to go to school." So nope, you're going to deprive yourself of these things, because of that. So yeah, I have a hate relationship with my body. When it comes to school, I'm like, "Now, you behave now. Don't you act up. Don't you go more [to the bathroom] than your...our required time, so there won't be an issue."*

Mary described the relationship with her body as a "hate relationship." As an elementary school teacher, Mary chose to reference the story of Cinderella, likely because fairy tales were a common part of the elementary school curriculum. In this quote, Mary described herself as the evil stepmother and her body as Cinderella. This analogy was fitting, because just as the wicked stepmother's mistreatment of Cinderella stemmed from hatred, so too did Mary come to hate her body and mistreat it. However, this mistreatment was confined only to the school, as Mary explained, "*I'm not as nice to myself when it comes to using the bathroom at work as I am at home.*" Mary's hatred of her body seemed to be for no reason other than her body getting in the way of her job. In stories like Mary's, we saw how broodmothering deemed a teacher's bodily needs as not only unimportant, but also a hindrance to the task at hand. This view can eventually breed a sense of self-contempt.

While Mary discussed how the lack of bathroom access changed her relationship with her body, Carmen explained how it changed her actual body by developing a "teacher bladder:"

*There's been many times in my personal life that I'm like, "Okay, I'm relying on my teacher bladder to get me through something." Like a long car ride, right? My husband and I just drove to and from Michigan for Christmas. We got stuck in traffic, but then I thought, "I got my teacher bladder. I'm okay." Right? If you have a couple glasses of wine while you're out, another person would be like, "I'm gonna have to go to the bathroom." Yet, because I have a teacher bladder, I'm okay. Most people in this situation would be like, "I'm uncomfortable. I'm going to use a restroom." But as proud as I am of my teacher bladder, it also scares me. How is that affecting my health? What if I have children and my bladder is forever changed? Could I still do my job? Most people don't have to think about how having a baby affects their ability to do their job. I am a healthy 34-year-old woman.*

Carmen recognized that her actions were different from others when it came to using the restroom. In addition, she understood that she changed her body by developing a "teacher bladder," and she even felt pressure to maintain this physical status in order to keep her job. Furthermore, knowing this affected her life choices (i.e. whether to have children or not).

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Though these issues affecting teachers could be studied only in relation to teachers themselves, how teachers are treated also affects other aspects of the school, such as the students. Sue explained the mental strain of trying to listen to students while delaying her bathroom needs:

*And then you lose track. I mean, most teachers can multitask in their brains, but you do forget where you are [in the lesson]. Sometimes it was, "What was I talking about again?" Or, you know, it's harder to stay focused on what you're doing. Or if a kid needs help, and you've got to go to the bathroom, it's like, "Okay, kid, hurry up with your question." I mean, you wouldn't say that. But you're thinking that.*

Sue described how delaying bodily needs for too long affected both her ability to focus and her patience with her students. While she was able to control herself in the moment, it is easy to imagine this situation escalating to a future breaking point which might strain teacher-student relationships.

Elizabeth discussed how her own experience with this issue rose to the level of tension between her and one student:

*One of my students the other day demanded a bathroom break. She said that if she held her urine, she could get a bladder infection. I had to bite my tongue. I could feel the words forming, "Well it's not like I get to go either." (Exhale) I'm sorry. It's just hard to be caring all the time, when nobody is caring about us and our health.*

Elizabeth had to "bite her tongue" because though she tried to maintain a caring attitude towards her students, she felt embittered because no one showed her the same consideration. Elizabeth's experience shows that teachers who are treated poorly will struggle to respond in caring ways towards students. Thus, student-teacher relations can depend on how the teachers are treated in their job, and broodmothering adversely impacts this.

Perhaps Bridget summarizes it best when she provides a vivid description of what it is like to live with this problem every day:

*It made me uncomfortable every single day of my job. Every day, every day, I was uncomfortable every day. I had anxiety about it. But it was weird how you just compartmentalize as a teacher. You just put it in the back of your mind. Like, I gotta pee. All right. Not until lunchtime in 15 minutes. I just accepted it as part of the deal. It's funny now, I think talking to you through these last two sessions, I'm like, wow, that was really, really...excuse my language, it was really shitty. I can't believe I...Perfect example: I saw Tik Tok the other day, and it was the Sunday before a teacher went back to school. And she's like, Oh, I have so much anxiety. But in nine days, I'm going to get a work-from-home-job where I can pee whenever I can. That was the first thing she said, "I'm so excited to work from home where I can pee whenever I want." So clearly, it is not just some minor issue. The more I talk about it, the angrier I do get about it. And the more I do think about it, the more I think it was just a lousy, lousy thing. A lousy part of the job that shouldn't be part of the job.*

Bridget's description portrayed the teacher bathroom dilemma as so linked to the job of teaching that quitting would be the only way to avoid it. Her realization that "it was really shitty" demonstrated how subconsciously she had accepted her broodmothering existence without question until reflecting upon it during the interviews. Her anger further compounded a sense of disbelief that teachers are required



to accept and adhere to these dehumanizing conditions. We maintain that this transformation to brood-mothering is an insidious process that infiltrates the entire job. However, Bridget's anger provided a ray of hope when she called this problem, "*A lousy part of the job that shouldn't be part of the job,*" as this implied she could still imagine the job in a way where teachers would have adequate bathroom access.

## **DISCUSSION**

Using our interpretative phenomenological analysis of the teacher bathroom dilemma, we garnered the phenomenological insight that teachers facing this dilemma act as broodmothers. Broodmothering requires valuing student health and well-being above their own. It starts with working within a schedule that allows little to no breaks, so that they never leave the students alone. Broodmothering is something that is not gender specific as it is connected to a teacher's occupational circumstance rather than a gendered oppression, hence we use it as a verb. To broodmother means one must plan their bathroom access carefully and around the needs of the brood (i.e., students). Broodmothering also requires teachers to modify their wardrobes by "dressing for undressing," whereby teachers choose clothing specifically for the purpose of removing it quickly enough to use the bathroom in the short time allotted, so the brood is alone for as little as possible. Broodmothering also means dehydrating, because restricting one's liquid intake equates to less bathroom usage. Tragically, broodmothering has both psychological and physical impacts, including the creation of self-destructive relationships with the body and altering the body itself through stretching the bladder as much as possible to increase urine storage. Finally, requiring teachers to broodmother sows the seeds of contempt between teachers and students, because students are not subject to the same restrictions on their bodily needs.

Since the first mention of inadequate bathroom breaks, they have been described as "trivial" (Apple, 1988, p.188). We hope to add to a small but mighty body of literature describing this issue as anything but trivial. The available literature on this topic has almost exclusively studied this using quantitative means (Kovač et al., 2013; Kovess-Masféty et al., 2006; Liao et al., 2006; Nygaard & Linder, 1997; Winchester, et al., 2023). Only one study has explored this topic qualitatively, and none have explored this issue from a phenomenological perspective (Coker, 2022). We also hope to add to a tradition of using phenomenology to more fully represent and explore teachers' lives (DeHart and Dunn, 2020; McGregor, 2020). While other teacher bathroom research has studied the prevalence or anticipated health impacts, only a phenomenological study can provide an understanding of the lived reality of this phenomenon as a single experience, both in terms of its psychological and physical impacts and how these occupational contexts affected it.

But what does this phenomenological study of broodmothering offer for helping us understand teachers? For one, we can put a name to the experience of the teacher bathroom dilemma by examining the combination of psychological and physical impacts that lead to a transformation. Broodmothering is a way of being where the denial of one bodily need cascades into the denial of other needs, requiring subsequent cognitive and behavioral changes to maintain it.

Additionally, the concept of broodmothering can help non-teachers understand the profession and what it demands in its current form. After all, many people have conditions such as Irritable Bowel Syndrome that would make entering the profession impossible, even after obtaining the required education. Since this is an implicit norm not advertised on teacher job postings, there may be some who discover they

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simply do not want a job that requires bathroom restrictions. Understanding broodmothering may also help other scholars explain relationship tensions between teachers and students.

The concept of broodmothering can also communicate the experience of teachers under current conditions, so that educational decision makers can make better choices for how schools should be administered and governed. For example, they might reconsider the number of teacher bathrooms in the building, how schedules are implemented, and/or adding staff members to lessen the burden of supervision. Perhaps, administrators could provide occasional bathroom relief and/or relax teacher dress codes.

Finally, educational decision makers should consider adopting a measure for teacher attrition based on the level of broodmothering that their schools require. As a set of guidelines for how administrators will know teachers no longer need to broodmother, we offer the following criteria for “leaving the nest”:

- Teachers should use the bathroom enough to be comfortable and stay emotionally present for their students.
- Teachers should have the freedom to dress in accordance with professional decorum and personal style rather than for emergency access.
- Teachers should be able to drink enough water to stay hydrated and maintain their voices for a long day of talking.
- Teachers need guaranteed planning periods to allow them to meet personal needs.
- Teachers need lunch breaks to eat and nourish themselves for the rest of the workday without the obligation to monitor students.

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