"Do the Hard Work": Identity Development and First Year Doctoral Students

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Abstract: This study examines the experiences of first year doctoral students in education to understand their identity development, self-concept changes, and the forces driving this development and change. Key findings include the centrality of challenges and obstacles, an enthusiasm for demanding tasks, the guidance of a larger purpose, the influence of community, and the construction of a personal narrative.

Keywords: doctoral students, identity development, self-concept, challenges

Introduction

Experience is a sociocultural phenomenon that cannot be reduced to the simple sum of an individual's performance or outcomes. Past experiences, emotions, relationships, mind-set, and self-concept impact the quality of a doctoral student's experiences as much as ability, aptitude, student services, and financial aid. In a similar way, a student's perceptions of him or herself, as well as his/her perceptions of how others perceive him/her are internalized and enacted through work and activity. It is a social, historical, and dialogical process. In this way, a fuller account of experience can be provided. This sociocultural conceptual framework guided our research questions as well as our interview protocol.

There are gaps in understanding the initial experiences of doctoral students. By understanding the forces shaping these students during a very formative time in their development as scholars and educators, a picture of adult identity development also emerges. Participants identified challenges and obstacles, academic and personal, they faced during their first year of graduate education; these were the primary forces that shaped who they became and the tools they used to adapt and grow into their new role.

Literature Review

Particularly relevant for our study are the literatures concerning graduate student characteristics and success, adult learning as a sociocultural phenomenon, and second career non-traditional returning adult students. Literature concerning graduate student characteristics and success includes studies examining socialization and creating an academic identity in doctoral programs (Austin, 2002; Gardner, 2007, 2008, 2010; Golde, 2000; McAlpine, Jazvac-Martek, & Hopwood, 2009; Sweitzer, 2009; Weidman & Stein, 2003), obstacles that graduate students must overcome and what coping mechanisms and support measures assist them (Barnes & Austin, 2009; Byers et al., 2014; Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Jimenez y West, Gokalp, Vallejo Pena, Fischer, Gupton, 2011; Martinez, Ordu, Della Sala, & McFarlane, 2013; Sturhahn Stratton, Miekle, Kirshenbaum, Goodrich & McRae, 2006; Zhao, Golde, & McCormick, 2007), and characteristics of part-time and non-traditional students (Cross, 2014; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Gardner & Gopaul, 2012).

The existing literature covers several issues related to graduate study. For instance, Golde's (2000) early work asserted that "doctoral education serves to socialize students into a profession; and simultaneously, students are socialized into, assume, and then leave, the role of

graduate student itself" (p. 200). He acknowledged that the successful socialization of students is dependent on both the individual student and the faculty of the department, highlighting the significance of the student's relationship with an advisor. In addition, Gardner's (2007, 2008, 2010) extensive work on socialization revealed that clarity, direction, and support are required if graduate students are to be successful dealing with ambiguity, study and life demands, and the need for independence in doctoral programs.

Austin (2002) looked at the socialization process of preparing for work as a professor. He concluded that doctoral programs prepared students for research rather than for teaching and often lacked effective mentoring. Peer relationships were significant as sources for social interaction and information sharing. Concerns about academic and outside life balance arose.

Sweitzer (2009) found that family and friend support could be as important as advisor support. In contrast, Weidman and Stein (2003) found that the encouragement and collegiality of faculty played the most significant role in graduate students' development as scholars prepared for futures in academia.

Several elements of graduate study that provide support for students have been investigated (Jimenez y West, Gokalp, Vallejo Pena, Fischer, Gupton, 2011), leading to an awareness of the importance of advisors (Barnes & Austin, 2009; Zhao, Golde & McCormick, 2007;), work-life balance (Martinez, Ordu, Della Sala & McFarlane, 2013; Sturhahn Stratton, Miekle, Kirshenbaum, Goodrich & McRae, 2006), and social relationships (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). The studies that looked at work-life balance (Jimenez y West, Gokalp, Vallejo Pena, Fischer, Gupton, 2011; Martinez, Ordu, Della Sala & McFarlane, 2013; Sturhahn Stratton, Miekle, Kirshenbaum, Goodrich & McRae, 2006) found graduate students, both full-time and part-time, faced difficulties with time management, handling job and family responsibilities, maintaining good health in stressful situations, establishing time for themselves, and building positive personal relationships. In order to overcome these obstacles to success, students relied on the support of family and friends, used available institutional services and faculty support, and remained optimistic. Additionally, Jairam and Kahl (2012) examined both the positive and negative effects of social support finding that while emotional, practical and professional support can help alleviate stress and social isolation, social relationships can be damaging when supporters are competitive, lack understanding of the student experience, do not communicate effectively, and cannot provide meaningful career advice. One coping strategy to deal with challenges that worked well was reliance on cohort members for support (Byers et al., 2014).

Despite the plethora of extant literature on doctoral student experiences related to socialization, identity creation, support structures, and coping strategies, there are gaps in the literature concerning doctoral students in the first stage of their studies.

Method

A phenomenological approach allowed us to "collec[t] data from [doctoral students] and develo[p] a composite description of the essence of the experience" (Creswell, 2006, p. 58), investigating what it means to be a doctoral student in an education program. We want our research to allow others, as Polkinghorne described, to "come away from the study with the feeling, 'I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that'" (as cited in Creswell, 2006, p. 62). Following this logic, our qualitative study used a phenomenological approach with semi-structured interviews. Each participant was interviewed once. The 60-90 minute interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The researchers had access to 14 potential subjects enrolled in two separate doctoral programs. Seven students participated in the study.

Research Questions

In this study, we explore the lived experience of first year doctoral students. Our research questions include: 1) How do they interpret their identities and their identity development as doctoral students? 2) What is the role of relationships that are personal, group, and/or institutional in this identity development? 3) What changes and adjustments have occurred during the first year of doctoral study that have influenced this identity development?

Research Site & Participants

Seven first year doctoral students in education fields were interviewed. They were from two different institutions and varied geographical locations in the Northeastern United States. Because we investigated two different cohorts of Ph. D. and Ed. D students, the research offers insights into the experiences of both scholarly and professional program students as well as full-time and part-time students. The focus on 1st semester experiences provides data on a specific and previously unexamined moment in doctoral studies. Additionally, concentrating on diverse students in education programs can provide a greater understanding of "how students of color, international students, part-time students, and non-traditional students experience these processes differently and how their individual characteristics influence the socialization [and academic] processes overall" (Gardner, 2007).

Participant Biographies

Patrice, Michelle and Donna work full time and are pursuing their doctorate in Educational Leadership at a small private college in a three-year cohort Ed. D. program. Sarah, Helen, and Sandy are full-time Ph.D. students in an Adult Education program at a large research university, and Lisa is a part-time D.Ed. student in the same program.

Discussion of Findings

Internalize the Identity

The primary theme that emerged from our study is that the process of beginning to internalize the identity of a doctoral student occurs through the challenges and obstacles of the first year of doctoral study.

Doing the hard work. The first sub-theme addressed the conscious choice to do something challenging and avoid a habitual professional or personal behavior patterns or status quo, especially in light of perceived opportunities, inclinations, prompts, and gifts or talents.

Patrice. "Well I'm not afraid of hard work. And I, I think you, you . . . there aren't very many ways to take shortcuts in a doctoral program. There are a lot of ways to take shortcuts in other parts of your life, but I don't think you can do that here because you're accountable to everyone for every piece of it. And they have, they have the bar set. It's not your bar . . . so I think you have to be a person who's willing to work hard. And doesn't um need to rely on shortcuts. You have to be willing to walk the walk and do the hard work and do it right. And you have to know that it's, it's going to take time. I have a tremendous amount of persistence and um perseverance. And I think that's a trait that will really benefit me here."

Helen. "Before um I would say I am, I had been a good student. A good student who does not . . . who concentrates in the class, who pays attention to what teacher says and what

other students says, and a student who prepares for the readings in the class and who searches for more information what, about what we learned in the class beyond the required readings . . . those were the characteristics I would say of a good student. But those are very um, very what do you say . . . good listener but very passive . . . I was taught and I was trained to pay attention to others. I was trained to be very kind to others. I was trained not to talk of bad experiences or what you think of, I mean what you think as not good openly with others . . . but now it's different. I mean being in this academic I must fear to think more critically about the structures or the things we normally are exposed to. I think now a good student is . . . the most important part would be how much you can raise different thoughts about the things you are, you normally take, which are counted, I mean, which are taken for granted. And that, that is the I think that is the most big strength of a good student and which I have the hardship."

Sandy. "I think you really have to believe in your ability. Um I think that's first."

Situating their ambitions in the context of a larger purpose. The second sub-theme represents the sense among our participants that their doctoral work is about much more than themselves; it is not a function solely of self-improvement or professional advancement. Rather, their motivation to overcome challenges and struggles was also related to a sense of purpose for making the world a better place or helping to diagnose injustices or create greater social justice.

Sarah. "Cause if there's not a hope that you might do something together as a community or you might learn something or talk about something that's meaningful, then why are we doing anything? Why don't we just go and watch Netflix? Yeah."

Patrice. "I think what makes a good student really has nothing to do with smarts. I think what makes a good student is working with a person who is interested in learning and who's interested in um improving themselves and is looking to the future for how they might be able to use that learning to change either their life or others' lives."

Donna. "So yeah about 12 years into my career I decided that um I found myself doing more community service related work like on my off time as opposed to um really feeling fulfilled on my fulltime job. So, then I decided to make the transition to education."

Sense of community with a common purpose. The third sub-theme, developing the primary theme of internalizing the identity of a doctoral student through the challenges of the first year, is the sense of community that our participants expressed, especially as they shared a common purpose with either family members or the members of the school community. In this way, relationships were a primary tool in their identity development.

Sarah. "I think I would say that community in anything is really important. I don't know if that's true for everyone. But as far as I have experienced it. That if you feel like you are isolated, it's hard to do anything. Um not that you have to be smothered by other people, but that people . . . that you have meaningful work to contribute and that other people are contributing to you and care about you. Um especially in education I think it's important because um it's not easy and when things aren't easy you need people to share it with especially I think . . . and when things are good. It makes it easier and it makes it more joyful when things are going well. And so often in, in a classroom it can feel like a competition unless you have a community I think."

Situated in a personal narrative. The fourth sub-theme represents the prominence of situating their desires, ambitions, and goals for doctoral study into the broad sweep of their life stories, as well as experiences that opened the cognitive-emotional door to doctoral study.

Patrice. "I grew up in a very service oriented family. I just grew up in a family that was always doing something for somebody in need. And I think that just became the mantra of the family . . . so I, I do feel like you know I could just hear my mother going, you got, you got to work with her. You're the one . . . do it. Just do it. You got to help this girl through this, you know. So of course, I'm going to do the right thing."

Michelle. "You know my mom um I . . . she's definitely a servant leader. She has given her whole life um for everything. But you know she graduated 8th grade and she has a very um conservative, simple life, which is beautiful and lives on the land. You know and it's beautiful. Um she, she encourages me to be the best that I can be. And I'll say this . . . I've said this before to my husband and he . . . it's that my mom taught me somehow that if you work hard enough your dreams will come true."

Sarah. "At home we talked . . . like peace and justice were a very important part of my faith and my parents' faith. And so growing up we talked about that a lot and went to protests and um yeah had friends from lots of places and I don't know. I guess it's just always been part of what I've thought about."

Conclusion

For our participants, working to overcome the difficulties they encountered during their first year of study led to their internalizing the identity of a doctoral student. These challenges and obstacles put into greater relief the enthusiasm for demanding tasks, the guidance of a larger purpose, the influence of community, and the construction of a personal narrative that shaped who they became.

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