

The Dangers in Thinking Alone: Education Graduate Students Building Community During their Scholarship

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What are the tensions and opportunities that frame the experiences of Ph.D. students? The challenge that doctoral students in education accept when entering the Ph.D. program is filled with academic demands. Completing a Doctorate requires showcasing one's academic ability and navigating through high scholarly expectations, including taking courses, completing assignments, assisting in teaching and writing, and contributing knowledge to their respective fields (Winter et al., 2000). Students are also encouraged to reflect deeply on their learning, which often occurs in isolated silos (Berg & Seeber, 2016); doctoral students' situations are unique in that they often work in isolation rather than in more traditional classroom settings or groups. According to Duke and Denicolo (2017), "the lack of integration into a supportive research culture may continue to inhibit researchers from reaching their full potential, resulting in dissatisfaction and attrition" (p. 2). This idea of a collaborative culture may be even more pertinent for emerging scholars and Ph.D. students.

The unique experience of graduate work is rewarding and yet challenging in many ways, but research has been limited regarding Ph.D. students' lived experiences. For instance, Janta et al. (2014) state that "the themes of loneliness and friendship networks are often examined from the international student perspective, with a specific focus on master's students' experiences" (p. 554). Sverdlik et al. (2018) note that research has focused on undergraduate students' wellness, motivation, and success and less on doctoral students' physiological and social experiences. So, while the experiences of undergraduate and master's level students have been explored in the literature, a gap remains for education Ph.D. students, leading us to ask: what are the lived experiences of Ph.D. students in education?

This study begins to address this gap by using data gathered at a graduate student data collection event guided by participatory action research (PAR) to understand better the realities of Ph.D. students through their lived experiences. We aim to understand the challenges that Ph.D. students encounter while exploring solutions to support current and future individuals in other doctoral programs of education.

Context

This study was completed with Ph.D. students from the Faculty of Education at the University of New Brunswick (UNB) in Fredericton. The participants in this study have diverse backgrounds: Canadian and international mature students with work and life experiences. At UNB, students begin their Ph.D. in educational studies by completing two doctoral seminar courses, in person and as a cohort, in addition to any other coursework suggested by their supervisor. After completing the coursework, students work independently on three comprehensive exams, a thesis proposal, an ethics application, a dissertation, and finally, the dissertation defense. While an open call went out to all Ph.D. students in education, this study's participants were in either the first or second year of their program. In total, six participants answered our call. All participants were invited to contribute at the data collection event only or to contribute to the data collection event

The Dangers in Thinking Alone

and then to join the research team as an author using participatory research methodologies (see: Levin & Greenwood, 2001).

Theoretical Framework

This study was approached using a social constructivism lens. The research team wanted “to construct knowledge through social interactions as well as to understand how individuals construct knowledge” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p.41) in relation to their Ph.D. journey. We acknowledge that all participants’ backgrounds are diverse, and that the Ph.D. process is unique based on participants’ current and previous experiences. In exploring this phenomenon in a constructivist manner, the team is “oriented to the production of reconstructed understandings of the social world” (Denzin et al., 2000, p. 158) This study aims to provide an entry point into understanding Ph.D. students’ experiences while avoiding the suggestion that all students experience doctoral studies in the same way.

Methodology

Our study was guided by PAR methodology. Burgess (2006) broadly defines PAR as a “collective dynamic process that encourages a high degree of participation, where community members become co-learners, co-researchers, and co-activists of a common concern” (p. 429). Burgess’s (2006) combination of participants and researchers engaging in the process of co-learning, co-researching, and co-activism is salient to our inquiry, as the authors of this work are both members of the study community and positioned to improve this community for themselves and future students. By actively collaborating with participants’ various experiences in their Ph.D. programs, we examined the visible and invisible successes, tensions, and challenges of graduate life. We entered this inquiry wondering if other graduate students were experiencing the same real-life issues as we were—like feeling the weight of isolation, moving through small victories and achievements, and facing periodic instances of deep confusion and disappointment—and were curious if these types of moments are commonplace among our peers. And in turn, we wondered how we might take the results from our study and use it to incite change within our own contexts. We also take up Levin and Greenwood’s (2001) idea, who note that PAR has value in academic communities—with the potential to reconnect students and scholars in the co-ownership and co-construction of knowledge. Given that isolation and academic silos often frame the educational experience (Berg & Seeber, 2013), we argue that PAR helps bring graduate students together as a collective (who, despite being in the same department, may never cross paths) to share valuable understandings around Ph.D. life and create meaning together.

Study Design

The individuals involved in this research had prior experience collaborating on an article, which highlighted the advantages of working collectively (Alderson et al., 2023). Consequently, this cohort expressed a strong interest in pursuing further shared learning experiences as graduate students, specifically tailored to their needs. Two of the authors began to discuss the idea of drawing on the strengths of members of the graduate student community to collaboratively navigate the maze of the academy by actively engaging in proposing, researching, writing, and publishing as first authors. From this idea, a research team was founded, who then drafted the

The Dangers in Thinking Alone

research plan, applied for research ethics approval, recruited participants, planned the data collection event, analyzed data, and ultimately collaborated to produce this work.

As plans became more formalized, the team began to grow: While the idea for the project initially began as an informal conversation between our first and second authors, they invited the rest of the team shortly afterwards. Then, the following questions were developed to explore at a World Café style event in the form of a data collection social:

1. What has been your experience in the Ph.D. program to date?
2. What challenges have you encountered in your Ph.D. program?
3. What strategies have you used to address these challenges? Where did you learn or develop these strategies?
4. What supports do you still need to address the challenges?

World Café events are a round-robin way of collaboratively sharing lived experiences and documenting thoughts and feelings related to specific questions. This format ensures that all participants can share their experiences, reflect with new collaborators, and make collective discoveries (Garner et al., 2023). For this study, data were collected at the World Café event by responding to each of the four questions as a collective group. The research team created a digital poster that was sent out via email to all graduate students in the program. We also printed and hung posters on our office doors. In total, there were six participants and we worked together for the duration of the event as a whole group. We met at the Graduate Lounge in our faculty building, and while participants were not provided compensation, the research team provided snacks and drinks. Point form responses were recorded on chart papers, and each discussion was audio-recorded for future reference and transcription. After collecting the data, the research team reviewed and analyzed the findings (from both the transcripts and the point-form responses) using an inductive approach (Thomas, 2006). Data was coded, and the dominant themes (Community and Connection, Isolation, Change, and Responsibility) were identified. Thematic social realities, which are the influences impacting the community and describe the shared experience of social actors (Busch, 2001), were then expanded for the community in question, doctoral students in education.

Data Analysis and Findings

The team gathered participants' data, followed by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After analyzing these themes, we formulated statements that encapsulated the social realities experienced by the participants. Below are the social realities of Ph.D. students in the education program (see: Table 1).

The Dangers in Thinking Alone

Community and Connection It is important for PhD students to build a continuous community within their cohort/faculty and have a strong and supportive relationship with their supervisor to ensure academic longevity.	Isolation There is loneliness associated with the PhD journey because students often work in silos. Support networks (family and friends) may not necessarily understand the nature of the work, the demands of the program, and the irregularities of academia.
Change Change is part of the PhD journey. Students at times experience rapid change within the program, with their financial and social realities, and the need to produce relevant presentations, papers, and research programs.	Responsibility Students have feelings of being overwhelmed due to the responsibilities and demands placed on them throughout the PhD process. There is often a feeling of guilt from the need to accomplish more work (i.e. write grants, apply for conferences, meeting supervisor expectations). Without having family support and understanding, this is intensified while dealing with rejection.

Table 1: Summary of social realities

Community and Connection

The first theme identified from our data was community and connection. The positive experiences that the participants reported were:

- Meeting their classmates
- Having a supportive group in their cohort
- Building a supportive community
- Supervisor support
- Working within the faculty as a way to maintain connections and build relationships

After the two required doctoral seminar courses, Ph.D. work at UNB becomes individualized. It was noted that the cohorts formed during the first year of coursework were significant catalysts for building friendships, working relationships, and connections among the graduate students. Participants discussed how their doctoral seminars fostered kinships that formed the foundation of lasting collaborative, empathetic, and supportive relationships. As one participant noted of her cohort, “the support that you get from them helps. The mere fact that I can call any of them at any time...when we open that communication to reach out, it’s just different...the journey so far has been good.” However, it was discussed that this sense of togetherness can be lost if students do not work to maintain the connections after year one. As one participant articulated, “one of the things that I worry about is losing that [kinship] in year two...right now, the class is a grounding moment.” While we see this representing a reality in any relationship, we also see this being part of the structure of our own program.

A second idea discussed in relation to community and connection was the importance of the student-supervisor relationship. Taking on an essential key mentorship role in the success of their students, supervisors set comprehensive examinations and guide students through the entire Ph.D. process. Participants who met with their supervisors regularly and had a productive working

The Dangers in Thinking Alone

relationship seemed more confident and at ease with their progress in the program. As one participant articulated, “everything comes down to who you have supporting you.” While most participants felt deeply supported by their supervisors, those who were not as connected (for instance, did not interact with their supervisor on a regular basis) sometimes felt more isolated. While discussing collective challenges, some solutions to the challenges of doctoral work, specifically feelings of isolation, were also proposed, including working collaboratively, joining university groups, and volunteering.

Isolation

From our findings, we noticed that community and connection seem essential for Ph.D. students, especially considering that many education Ph.D. students, and all participants in this study, enter doctoral work after leaving another community and career. While finding community was regularly mentioned by student participants as a positive aspect of beginning a Ph.D. program, loss of community can also occur during a Ph.D. Several participants in this study noted that friends, colleagues, and family struggled to understand the constraints that doctoral students worked within, and those outside the academy often misunderstood doctoral student work. For instance, a lack of understanding from friends and family regarding the time and energy needed to complete all the responsibilities of the program. Participants noted that their friends and family often perceive that the work in a Ph.D. program is not demanding. One participant notes her frustration over “the lack of understanding from family and friends...it doesn’t seem [to them] like a real job.” Several participants reported a general perception by friends and family that a doctoral program is simply reading and writing, with an overall disregard towards maintaining and nourishing relationships. Although a Ph.D. might not look like traditional work in education like teaching, Ph.D. students are under pressure to research and present research at conferences. Participants suggested that a lack of understanding from traditional support networks contributes to the feeling of isolation.

Isolation was a commonly discussed theme, but possible solutions to this feeling were presented alongside the challenges. The importance of being in the physical space of the university was suggested as one possible solution to a feeling of isolation. It was noted that some students enjoyed working from home but felt that they experienced more opportunities for collaboration when they were on campus. By working on campus participants felt they gained allies who encouraged them to join more diverse projects outside of their respective fields and the physical presence of other students who understand the challenges of academic work was noted as a solution to gaps in traditional support networks.

Change

Ph.D. students, at times, experience rapid change within the program, from their financial and social realities to the drastic conception of what “work” is. Change is part of the Ph.D. journey, particularly for the group of participants in this study who all left previous careers to reenter life as a student, including several participants who moved to a new country to do so. Participants reported that year one of doctoral work seemed less overwhelming compared to the experiences described by their second-year counterparts. This may be due to the companionship and community formed within the cohort. Participants who were in the second year of the program experienced greater feelings of isolation, uncertainty, and a sense of loss. Notably, they mentioned

The Dangers in Thinking Alone

that it was due to a loss of structure from not attending regular doctoral classes. Participants noted that the shift between years one and two was a huge change and challenge.

A second aspect of the change is moving through the financial burden of student life. Many Ph.D. students in education are working teachers who often must take time off work to complete a portion of their program. As one participant draws attention to, “I am coming from a secure job, to now maybe not having a job next year. It is challenging not to think about the financial stress.” A loss of income and uncertainty concerning future employment and job security were discussed at length by participants: Importantly, the participants in this study all came from established careers (many were educators before entering the program) and mentioned fears surrounding securing academic employment following the completion of the Ph.D. Academic institutions are increasingly being operated like businesses with increased focus on productivity and less on the generation of scholarship and ideas, resulting in more contract employment and fewer tenure track positions (Fasenfest, 2021).

While financial stress and pressure, as well as uncertainty surrounding career prospects, was an almost universal concern for all research participants. A less common yet existing challenge emerged when students found themselves compelled to change their academic supervisors due to unforeseen complications beyond their control. This necessitated a significant pivot in their academic pursuits, amplifying the emotional toll endured throughout their Ph.D. journey. Given the supervisors’ importance in the Ph.D. program, this dramatic change impacts participants’ research and motivation.

Further compounding these changes are the less subtle experiences of international students navigating the Ph.D. program. Several of our participants are international students who have had to uproot their lives and livelihoods to begin their new journey through academia. International students have much to add and are valued members of the Ph.D. community. They face similar struggles and those are compounded by systemic barriers that newcomers face when coming to a new country. One participant noted, “the most challenging thing is that when I leave my country, it means that I leave my career and my job... so I have to start over here...it’s a huge challenge.” Many of our participants are multilingual and work in English, which is not their first language. The international participants experienced feelings of inadequacy and concern over the extra time required to complete work in an additional language. According to Cummins, acquiring academic knowledge of a language is more challenging than conversational language (Kielet, 2021). There is a significant difference in the time students learn everyday speech and academic language; on average, it is typically four years variance.

Responsibility

Most participants noted feeling overwhelmed because of the responsibilities and demands placed on them throughout the Ph.D. process. There is often a feeling of guilt from the need to accomplish more work (i.e., write grants, apply for conferences, meet supervisor expectations). One participant reflects, “I always feel like I have to be working...a looming sense that I always have to be doing something.” The revolving door of work that accompanies doctoral studies—working on comprehensive exams, writing articles, research projects, presenting at conferences, building CVs, applying for grants, and doing teaching assistant and research assistant work while maintaining everyday lives further compounded the experiences discussed. Participants felt a deep sense of responsibility and need to be successful, while fearing and experiencing rejection. The participants noted tensions when learning to navigate feelings of rejection while maintaining a sense of belonging within academia. Rejection comes from rejected scholarly articles, fellowships,

The Dangers in Thinking Alone

grants and scholarships, and job opportunities. Many participants have been established in their careers as educators and did not often experience the intensity of rejection in their professional lives. Shouldering the responsibility and demands of the program without having family support and understanding is intensified while dealing with rejection. From here, we wonder more broadly: In what ways has successful participation in academia prevented scholars from finding ways to cope with rejection?

International Student Experience

Upon analyzing the data, it became clear that the aforementioned challenges are magnified for international students. In their pursuit of graduate studies in a new country, they are faced with the daunting task of navigating an unfamiliar system, making community and connections more crucial. Without a support system, feelings of isolation and loneliness can be particularly intense, given the distance from their families and the need to build new friendships. Furthermore, international students experience more significant changes when they move to a new country where adapting to a new culture and language can be overwhelming. Starting from scratch and learning even minor things can make the transition more challenging, especially in a second language. Financial issues are also a significant concern, as they have left their jobs and need to build their lives in a new situation. Moreover, the responsibilities that international students face are greater than those of their native counterparts. They must work harder to establish themselves and make a life in a new country while simultaneously studying, sometimes without the support of family. The challenges faced by international students have added a layer of complexity to their lives, making it imperative to address their unique needs and provide them with the support they require to thrive in their new environment.

Limitations

This work is intended to be an exploratory and initial look into the lives of Ph.D. students in education. The experiences captured are all drawn from students within the same institution and program and, therefore, may not apply to students outside of these contexts. Despite these limitations, there is value in beginning to discuss shared challenges, as was the case in this work.

Conclusion

In this paper, we explored the experiences of first- and second-year PhD students in educational studies. We explored the opportunities and tensions they encountered at the intersection of four common themes: Community and Connection, Isolation, Change, and Responsibility. This work begins to explore the demands and challenges of Ph.D. students in education, but more work needs to be done. This work was investigated using a PAR lens with the hope of improving the experiences of students currently enrolled in a Ph.D. and those who will follow. Prior to this study, the participants were navigating all the social realities mentioned alone and without a network of support. As Kutsyurba et al. (2021) state, “by understanding the factors that contribute to a student’s ability to thrive within their program of study, educational leaders can better shape an environment that prioritizes student well-being” (pp. 227-228); we agree that with this understanding of the challenges of fellow doctoral students, there was a comfort in having a community. Engaging in the act of collaborative inquiry, as was explored in this study, is one suggestion for future emerging scholars to address these feelings of isolation. And still, we wonder

if the onus should be solely on the students themselves to strength collaboration opportunities. What other aspects of institutional infrastructure reinforce this sense of isolation and stress on graduate students? We see these questions as opportunities for future research. Ultimately, we argue that there are dangers in thinking alone and that much can be learned through collaborating with fellow graduate students, even outside of traditionally defined fields.

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