What are Doctoral Students' Perceptions of the

PhD Process in the Faculty of Education?   A Pilot Study.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of doctoral students in a western

Canadian university about the doctoral programs offered in the Faculty of Education. The

research for the study was undertaken using a mixed-method explanatory design. Our initial

research question was: "what are some of the factors that doctoral students in Education

perceive to be significant in their PhD experience?" In answer to this question we gathered data

from both online surveys and individual interviews. The survey sought to find out doctoral

students perceptions of cohorts in terms of emotional and/or professional support; the amount of

out of class socialization among cohorts; the opportunity to work collaboratively with their

peers; and, what they saw as the traits a PhD student in the faculty needed to possess to be

successful. Six doctoral students were individually interviewed, three who were in a cohort, and

three who were not in a cohort to gather further information about their personal experiences.

The perceptions of doctoral students in the Faculty of Education, at the University of Manitoba,

can be looked at in two contexts: the factors that students identified as working well in the

program, and the factors that needed some attention. The factors that were working well, and

thus were identified as being positive aspects of the doctoral program include: supportive faculty

including, but not limited to, committee members; belonging to a cohort for both emotional and

professional support; bi-monthly doctoral student meetings with the Associate Dean in charge of

graduate students; and, the opportunity to become a participant in the scholarly community that

was part of the Faculty of Education.

What are Doctoral Students' Perceptions of the PhD Process in the Faculty of Education?

A Pilot Study.

Introduction

The Doctor of Philosophy [Ph.D.] program is an arduous one for most students especially once they finish the required course work and begin to carry out their research and write their dissertation. It can be a lonely, isolating experience for some students (Pyhalto, Toom, Stubb & Lonka, 2012). And yet it does not have to be. Austin (2009) emphasized the importance of fostering engagement in doctoral students at the graduate level. She hypothesized that "for those [doctoral students] preparing for academic careers, the doctoral years are a period of socialization" (p. 173). She went on to say that "students are learning what the academic career involves, the norms, values, and ethics embedded in their disciplines, and the expectations and work habits that they will be expected to meet" (p. 173). In addition, Merton, Reader, and Kendall (as cited in Austin, 2009) define socialization as "the process through which [a person] develops [a sense of] professional self, with its characteristic values, attitudes, knowledge, and skills which govern [his or her] behaviour in a wide variety of professional (and extraprofessional) situations" (p. 173).

The period of socialization for doctoral students occurs "through formal and informal opportunities as doctoral students learn knowledge and skills required for work in the field, interact with faculty and student peers, and integrate into the activities of their fields" (Austin, 2009, p. 174). Austin (2009) indicated that for doctoral students "situated learning is enhanced when students make their learning meaningful to themselves and are supported in their learning when they are part of a 'community of practice' in which they are engaged with others" (p. 176).

She believes that "collaborative learning processes enhance the quality of the community of practice and strengthen the learning experience for participants" (p. 176).

Golde and Dore (2001) in their research study of Ph.D. students, across faculties, found that there are:

> Two common assumptions about purpose and process that underlie most doctoral programs. First, the Ph.D. is assumed to be a research degree, and its primary purpose is teaching junior scholars to conduct sound, rigorous research. Second, the operating model is one of apprenticeship. Typically, students work under the tutelage of their advisors, learning the intricacies of research, and becoming increasingly independent scholars. Within this framework there is, of course, considerable variation among disciplines. Students in some fields begin to conduct supervised research their first term and see their advisor nearly every day. They conduct research in laboratories, with teams of students, faculty, and postdoctoral fellows. In other fields, each scholar works in isolation, and students meet with their advisors infrequently. Consequently, the experiences of students across disciplines vary. Further, the experiences of students within the same program may vary as well. (p. 4)

In their study, conducted at the University of Helsinki, Finland, Pyhalto, Stubb, and Lonka (2009) addressed "doctoral students' ideas about the scholarly community, their perceptions about their learning environment and well-being" (p. 224). The study gathered data from 602 doctoral candidates from three faculties: arts, medicine, and behavioural sciences using a survey method. They found that some doctoral students did not perceive themselves to be members of a scholarly community, and felt like outsiders in their faculty. The authors further

discovered that "the education PhD students felt most isolated . . . students perceived themselves as outsiders of [the] scholarly community" (p. 227).

Golde and Dore (2001) stressed the need for looking at doctoral education through the eyes of students which provides a different vantage point from that of faculty members. They further stated that since the students are on the receiving end of doctoral education, their experiences help give insights into how the system functions, what is working, and what is not.

The Ph.D. program, in the Faculty of Education, at the University of Manitoba is made up of a number of disciplines and departments. In some of the programs, students are admitted in cohorts; in other programs, students are admitted ad hoc. Given this diversity, it is possible that some students may benefit from their cohort experience while others may feel alienated or cut-off. Pyhalto, Stubb, and Lonka (2009) found that one-third of the PhD students they surveyed felt isolated from their academic community. They suggested that students who are in the same program can consider and experience the same scholarly community in a variety of ways.

Our research question was: "what are some of the factors that doctoral students in Education perceive to be significant in their PhD experience?"

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical background for this research is social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978). By its very nature, a doctoral program is, or ought to be, a community of learners. In order for the program to be successful, it needs to be structured so that doctoral students get a chance to focus on their individual research within the interactions of a larger group. Through shared experiences, students can construct meaning for one another which may lead to greater understanding of their individual programs. In addition, the interaction and collaboration with more knowledgeable others (e.g., the Faculty) allows students to become acclimatized to their

new learning environment. Social construction of knowledge follows from the social interactions of the students and faculty. In large part, the dialogue both between students and students and between students and faculty serves to actualize the significant discourses that make up the PhD program.

Significance of Research Topic

This study is notable because it may serve to identify some of the dynamics of learning within the Faculty of Education that have been identified by doctoral students. In addition, insights gained from the students may foster a discussion of ways to enhance the program to ensure that students feel that they are part of a scholarly community at the University of Manitoba. It may also offer insights into the cohort program, and the role a cohort plays in terms of personal and professional support. Due to the features of the doctoral program at the University of Manitoba the reader should be careful in generalizing to doctoral programs at other institutions. However, the data collected in this study does provide similar student perceptions as reported in previous studies of doctoral students so these findings are relevant in gaining a better understanding of students' perceptions of doctoral programs.

Methodology

This article reports on the findings of a study that sought to determine the personal viewpoints of doctoral students in the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba. An online survey invitation was sent to all of the doctoral students registered in the faculty in Fall 2010. The survey sought to find out doctoral students perceptions of cohorts in terms of emotional and/or professional support; the amount of out of class socialization among cohorts; the opportunity to work collaboratively with their peers; and, what they saw as the traits a doctoral student in the faculty needed to possess to be successful. Participants were asked

questions related to these areas because these are the issues that have been identified in the

literature to be important indicators of doctoral students' success in completing their studies.

Participants

In order to address the research questions, sixty-one doctoral students were sent the

invitation to participate in the online survey. Of these sixty-one, four students were not able to

access the survey due to technical difficulties that were not brought to the researchers' attention

until the survey had closed, and, two students were the principal researchers. This left a potential

pool of fifty-five doctoral students. The return rate was 45%, with years in the program ranging

from first-year students to students who had been in their programs for over four years. In

addition 64% of the respondents indicated that they belonged to a cohort group and, 36%

indicated that they did not belong to a cohort.

At the end of the online survey there was a place asking individuals if they would consent

to being individually interviewed about their answers on the online survey. We wanted to

interview six doctoral students, three who were in a cohort, and three who were not in a cohort.

Out of the twelve participants who agreed to be interviewed, we randomly chose six that were

individually interviewed. The six doctoral students, five female and one male, were interviewed

individually for one hour each to obtain data related to their perceptions of the PhD program in

the Faculty of Education. Interview appointments were set up by e-mail. All interviews were

tape recorded, and data was transcribed, and analyzed according to qualitative research

guidelines. Reductive analysis (the identifying, coding and categorizing of data into meaningful

units) was used to identify themes and patterns in the data.

Doctoral students, both on the online survey, and the individual interviews, were asked to

provide examples that would corroborate their responses in an attempt to address the limitations

of self-response. To ensure validity of the data collected all interviews once transcribed were returned to the participants, via e-mail, for verification purposes before analysis began. In the final report no names were used and direct quotations were attributed to a pseudonym.

Faculty of Education University of Manitoba

The Faculty of Education doctoral program has two departments that accept doctoral students: Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning (CTL); and, Educational Administration, Foundations and Psychology (EAF&P). Within the Department of CTL, the subsections include: Language and Literacy; Studies in CTL; and, Second Language Education and Studies in CTL. In the department of EAF&P the following areas are available for study: Inclusive Special Education; Social Foundations; Guidance and Counselling; Educational Administration; and, Adult and Post-Secondary Education. Students can either be admitted to a cohort group which is in a defined program area, or, students can be admitted into an ad hoc program, rather than to a defined program area. For ad hoc students the program area coursework is specific to the individual student and is defined by the Advisory Committee rather than by members of a defined program area

Doctoral students must take twenty-four credit hours in their program: a minimum of nine credit hours in their area of specialty, a minimum six credit hours in their support area, and, a minimum of six credit hours in research methods. In addition, a three credit hour doctoral tutorial is taken with the student's advisor. Once coursework has been completed, students are required to complete the Candidacy Examination requirement which may be satisfied in any one of three options: a closed-book examination; a take-home examination; or, two comprehensive review papers on distinctly different topical areas that are both different from the specific topic of the PhD dissertation. The candidacy exam is set by the student's Advisory Committee and is

approved by the Doctoral Studies Committee. Once the candidacy exam is successfully

completed, students can go on to the next level which is preparing their dissertation proposal

(from the University of Manitoba website). Time to completion of the doctoral program is set at

a maximum seven years.

Findings

Our initial research question was: "what are some of the factors that doctoral students in

Education perceive to be significant in their PhD experience?" In answer to this question we

gathered data from both online surveys, and individual interviews. The perceptions of doctoral

students in the Faculty of Education, at the University of Manitoba, can be looked at in two

contexts: the factors that students identified as working well in the program, and the factors that

needed some attention. The factors that were working well, and thus were identified as being

positive aspects of the doctoral program include: supportive faculty including, but not limited to,

committee members; belonging to a cohort for both emotional and professional support; bi-

monthly doctoral student meetings with the Associate Dean in charge of graduate students; and,

the opportunity to become a participant in the scholarly community that was part of the Faculty

of Education. Of the factors that needed some attention, doctoral students cited a: lack of

support from faculty including, but not limited to, committee members; cohorts that were not

supportive; academic standards that were not as high as expected; and the lack of a scholarly

community in the faculty. The seeming dichotomy displayed in this study is indicative of other

doctoral studies, most notably the research carried out by Pyhalto, Toom, Stubb, and Lonka

(2012) who found that students' experience in the doctoral program was dependent on several

factors. They identified the following as contributing to a students' satisfaction with the program

including "supervisors' individual preferences, previous learning experiences, knowledge, skills,

and resources [which] contribute to the supervisory relationship, and thus, to the doctoral

experience" (p. 2).

In addition, doctoral students, in this study, gave their perceptions of what traits a PhD

student needed to be successful in their program. Some of the traits mentioned included: the

ability to be independent, and self-motivated; the ability to be goal oriented so that students can

set realistic annual goals and objectives; the ability to receive constructive criticism without

being defensive; and, the ability to persist and persevere despite obstacles.

These same themes were found in both the online surveys, and the individual interviews.

It is interesting to note that many of the factors referred to as positive, were also mentioned as

factors that needed some attention. Since we were researching the doctoral students'

perceptions, we found that how students viewed the doctoral program was very much dependent

on their own experiences within the faculty. A similar finding by Pyhalto, Stubb, and Lonka

(2009) verifies that how students perceived their programs was dependent on individual

experiences. The authors further found that the students who were very happy with the program

tended to have supportive advisors, and cohorts, while those who wanted some changes often did

not have the same level of support. This study had similar findings.

This discussion will first focus on the factors that students identified as working well

within the faculty, followed by a discussion of those factors that were identified as needing some

attention, and finally a discussion of the traits needed to be successful in the doctoral program in

the Faculty of Education as perceived by the students currently enrolled in the doctoral program.

Discussion

Theme 1: Supportive Environment

In this section the discussion will focus on the support given to the doctoral students. This support came from three sources: the faculty, their peers, and, the get-togethers arranged by the associate Dean of Education.

Sub-Theme 1: Supportive Faculty

When it came to discussing faculty, many students in both the cohort, and the non-cohort groups, mentioned that having supportive faculty was extremely important for the successful completion of their degree. These findings are similar to Phyalto, Toom, Stubb, and Lonka (2012) who observed that the PhD students in their study cited supportive faculty and the scholarly community as contributing factors to their overall doctoral experience. In this study, how students perceived their advisor and committee members depended on the amount of interaction between advisor and student which varied significantly, some students felt that their advisor was available on an almost daily basis for consultation, while others expressed frustration at seeing their advisors only infrequently, and only getting together with their committees when it was time for the annual progress report.

Becky in discussing her experiences said, "I always felt like everything was done very professionally and handled very professionally . . . I always felt like I could access my professors at any time . . . they were very open to support in any way . . . I would say everything was done very much in a scholarly [way and we were encouraged] to write and encouraged to present [at conferences and workshops]".

This sentiment was echoed by another one of the survey respondents who said, "the faculty seem to have a significant investment in scholarly activity and current and past student

publications, presentations, etc. are highlighted. Some professors have made concerted efforts to

increase comfort with scholarship; arranging open presentations or work, encouraging

publication etc." Another student pointed out that, "I was given opportunities to teach, publish,

and present as were other members of my cohort. We all felt included by the faculty, program,

and advisors". This view was substantiated by another student who found that "the courses have

been stimulating . . . the profs I have had have been approachable, professional, and helpful".

Another student commented that, "the space the professors gave us to explore areas of interest;

[the] detailed feedback on my work enabled me to grow as a writer and researcher, topics studied

were highly relevant and interesting . . . I felt engaged in classes a high percentage of the time

because of a wide variety of instructional techniques, [the] textbooks and readings were relevant

. . . and accessibility of professors [was a positive in the program]".

In terms of faculty support on committees, many students expressed the same sentiments,

"It is important to have a strong committee because they can support you, they get what you

want to do". And, "I think an individual's doctoral program success depends on their advisor

and committee . . . the committee has a real strong influence on the success and challenges you

face as a doctoral student . . . I believe your committee makes or breaks a candidate". You need

"a supportive invested advisor and committee . . . to help you recognize the milestones, helping

you recognize when you're not meeting the targets you have set . . . you need your committee to

be fully informed because they ultimately are your scholarly supporters".

Many of the doctoral students were very attached to their advisors, and committees, and

cited the support of their committees for keeping them going in the program. They expressed the

need to have a committee that understood their area, and what they wanted to accomplish.

Students acknowledged that the role of the committee became of paramount importance once the

required courses were completed, and they began work on their dissertation, which they said was a lonely process due to the individualistic nature of writing a dissertation.

Sub-Theme 2: Peer Support - Emotional support provided from the cohort

Having support from fellow students, in addition to support from faculty, was another important factor for doctoral students. On the online survey, 76% of respondents, who belonged to a cohort, agreed or strongly agreed that belonging to a cohort was beneficial in terms of emotional support. In addition, of the students who belonged to a cohort, 75% of those students agreed or strongly agreed that their experience with belonging to a cohort was a positive one. The majority of the students cited the benefit of having other students who they could empathize with, someone who knew what they were going through, and could relate to the same stresses and deadlines. Becky said:

> yes, the initial courses, the whole cohort was together, and so we really got to know each
> other . . . there was always that strong bond . . . you've got these people who are going
> through similar things that you are, that other's haven't gone through so you can relate to
> what they say, and they can relate to what you are going through at the same time, and
> you can talk about when they went through it . . . so the cohort provided that support.

From the comments given on the survey, one of the participants said, "I don't think I would have even got to this point without them [my cohort]. We have cried together, laughed together, seen each other at our worst, and best. They are an unending source of support and motivation". Another respondent said, "being part of a cohort definitely goes a long way to minimize feelings of isolation. Sharing the experience with others has a value-added dimension to both the academic and the psychological aspects of the experience".

The feeling of isolation was one of the reasons given by two separate students, who were each in an ad hoc program, who wished that they had been part of a cohort. Josie said:

because you see other students at the same . . . not say at the same level but anyway

starting the program with you, all of you doing the same thing, having the same goals,

doing the coursework, and the candidacy exam . . . and every time you have a problem,

[or] you feel pressure, you [would] have at least one person to go to who can understand

you . . . but if you are part of an ad hoc there is no one for you, no such person to go to.

Samantha echoed this sentiment, "in one way it would be nice to have someone to commiserate with, to talk about, and you know how are you preparing for this? Or how are you doing this".

Sub-Theme 3: Social aspect of cohort away from university

Sixty-two percent of students who were in a cohort agreed or strongly agreed that their cohort made an effort to get together outside of class time, "and we would get together often, and we would go and have potlucks at one of our houses. It's just been really good to sort of have someone that you can call who's been through a similar process".

However, some students who belonged to a cohort did not need, or want, their cohort to meet outside of class. They cited a reluctance to form social relationships with the members of their cohort, because they had their own social networks outside of the university. Joe commented, "[in terms of getting together outside of class] . . . I have never been an individual who has been inclined to do that sort of thing. I tend to keep that aspect of life somewhat separate". On the survey one of the students said:

At times I felt that the cohort was looking for social relationships that I was not interested

in developing . . . I am not looking for social relationships . . . I am working, I have a

young family, and I have my own social and family obligations. The pressure to be part

of a tight-knit cohort beyond class-time was not something that I was willing to be a part

of. At times this caused tension.

Other cohorts did not get together outside of class. Victoria said, "but as far as meeting

outside of class time, it didn't really happen . . . [this was probably for the best because] given

the real tension anytime we met [in class], I would probably say no [that we should have made

more of an effort to get together]". Still another felt that "some of the classmates either chose to

stand [apart] or were made to feel unwelcome, depending on one's perspective . . . [and] this

disunity was destructive and disheartening [to the cohort]".

The amount of emotional and professional support provided by members of the cohort

varied from almost total support in both areas, to no support in both areas. Again, this difference

appears to stem from the individual students. Some wanted the support and actively pursued it,

while others did not want that support, for various reasons, and did not subscribe to it.

Sub-Theme 4: Professional support provided from the cohort

In terms of the cohort providing professional support, 73% of respondents, who belonged

to a cohort agreed or strongly agreed that belonging to a cohort was beneficial in terms of

professional support. The perceptions of what constituted professional support, and the

definition of what professional support was, meant different things to the individuals

interviewed. Josie saw professional support as having someone to talk to about her courses and

the doctoral program in general. She said, "every time you have problems with the assignments

like some question or something, you need to clarify these things . . . your friend is a good

person to go to . . . you feel yourself as part of a community . . . having the same goals, then they

[friends/colleagues] can support you emotionally and professionally". Becky found that:

when we were working together . . . doing the same course work and things we would

work together and even when we were doing course work, that wasn't sort of with our

cohort . . . we would work together, and if we knew the interests of other people, and we

found articles or books, or whatever, and we would support each other that way . . . sort

of that professional bonding.

Sub-Theme 5: Support was provided by structured opportunities to meet with peers

through meetings held by the Associate Dean of Graduate Studies in Education

The Associate Dean made an effort to schedule doctoral students' meetings bi-monthly

where all doctoral students were invited to attend. Most meetings were organized around a topic

of interest that had been identified by the doctoral students. At each of the meetings there was

time allotted for students to introduce themselves and their area of specialty. For the students

who were not in cohorts, the bi-monthly meetings provided a different form of support than they

received from their advisors and doctoral committees. The comments made by Josie, were

substantiated by other students, who felt that:

> [at the meetings] I could see other people having the same concerns as I do . . . I think
>
> any kind of meeting where we talk about issues and questions we have would be helpful .
>
> . . and perhaps this is the only chance for me to get to meet and see other PhD students
>
> [because I am not a member of a cohort]. It [the meetings] provides us with a chance to
>
> meet other like-minded people.

Mary felt that:

> the meetings for me had less to do with the topic and more to do with the bringing
>
> together of people who are currently working on projects at different stages of

development. It's an opportunity to network, it's an opportunity to share, it's an

opportunity to catch up . . . it's more the getting together of the like-minded.

For the students who were in a cohort, the social aspect of the meetings was maybe not as

important as it was for the doctoral students who did not belong to a cohort. Joe said, "the

timing [of the meetings] unfortunately for me is just often really, really bad".   Victoria felt that

the way the meetings were set up did not foster an atmosphere where doctoral students could

really get to know each other:

> and in the support group, we didn't really talk about what our areas of interest are . . . we
>
> introduce ourselves and what strand are you in, and not this is what my research is but we
>
> didn't meet as often as I thought we were going to . . . bi-monthly was not how often we
>
> met . . . if we had met bi-monthly with a cross-section of people you develop then a
>
> support network, a scholarly network.

For Victoria, who acknowledged that she was in a dysfunctional cohort, the meetings with the

Associate Dean took on an importance that might not have been there if she had found support

within her own cohort. Victoria observed that "the meetings with [Associate Dean] were a way

for me to discuss the doctoral program with others who were going through the same things I

was. I needed that since I couldn't talk to members of my cohort".

Theme 2: Scholarly Community at the University of Manitoba

Doctoral students were also asked if they felt like they were a part of the scholarly

community at the University of Manitoba. Sixty-three percent, of all doctoral students, felt that

they were part of a scholarly community. The reasons given for their perceptions of being part

of a scholarly community included:

we have opportunities to collaborate on research and to discuss and process our own

research with the group; the members of the cohort created an online community for

communications and sharing . . . members were very supportive of one another and

shared scholarly work; I feel there is an emphasis on research, writing, and learning at the

U of M. The focus seems to be trying to help each student pursue their interests and

begin to write and present in academic ways.

Each of the students who commented had their own view of what it means to be part of a

scholarly community. For some students it was having the opportunity to take part in research,

and to present their findings. For other students, a scholarly community was one where there

was support from both faculty and peers in encouraging them to pursue their individual area of

interest. Pyhalto, Stubb and Lonka (2009) observed that "more than half (55%) of the PhD

students perceived themselves as members of some scholarly community, though different

meanings and interpretations of this perception existed" (p. 226).

Theme 3: Areas that could use some attention

Four themes were identified from the online survey and from the individual interviews.

These themes centred round factors that could be changed or modified so that the doctoral

program at the University of Manitoba, in the Faculty of Education, would better meet the needs

of all students. Students mentioned the lack of faculty preparedness; lack of cohort support; the

seemingly lack of academic standards; and the lack of a scholarly community in the faculty.

Sub-Theme 1: Concerns about Faculty

The concerns about academic rigour in the faculty extended to concerns about the

members of the faculty who were teaching the courses. Joe was candid in his evaluation of the

instructors in the Faculty of Education "I can think of only one or two faculty members over the

course of my experience . . . to be seen to be constantly breeding the highest levels of scholarly

behaviour . . . where you absolutely come prepared". And another doctoral student stressed that,

"[a PhD student needs] a strong academic environment. In the Faculty of Education, there is no

such environment. Most PhD students are independent". In similar comments, one student felt

that "the preparation and expertise of all the professors was not always evident. While some

clearly had skill in promoting debate and higher-order thinking, others were confused about their

role in the process". Samantha thought that some faculty were not as open as others [to shared

academic pursuits]:

> and then there are faculty that say this is the way you do education, those faculty
>
> members will never collaborate with anyone in another department and it's too bad.
>
> They could learn something from someone else and someone could learn something from
>
> them. So, I think it's an attitude.
>
> One of the students in the survey mentioned that he/she:
>
> enjoyed most of my courses, and I like being challenged but not in a negative way that
>
> makes me feel stupid as compared to others. It seems that there is only one way to think
>
> and do things such as research and if one decides that there is another way you are kind
>
> of left out of the loop or re-routed to think your ideas and/or ways of [doing] things is not
>
> right.
>
> Still another student felt that:
>
> [what was needed was] clarification and/or standardization of processes. Every student
>
> in my cohort and every other PhD student in the Faculty seems to have a different story
>
> for how things progress. What constitutes a full-time student, how do candidacy exams

work, how should progress meetings go . . . [we need] better descriptions of the courses.

. . consistent feedback . . . each prof differs in how they provide feedback.

The sentiments expressed by these students were not indicative of the majority of

respondents on either the on-line survey or the individual interviews. However, the fact that

many students brought this topic up shows that there is concern about the academic rigours, not

only of the courses, but also of the faculty that are part of the PhD program in the Faculty of

Education at the University of Manitoba.

Sub-Theme 2: Concerns about the level of emotional support provided by members

of a cohort

For the students who had supportive cohorts the experience was very good. But like all

experiences, being part of a cohort was not all positive. Joe said:

the only contact time we had was during those twelve credit hours of compulsory core

courses and outside of that, there was very little contact, there wasn't that fraternal or

sorority kind of aspect where we would spend even short hours of time in discussions and

so on.

Victoria mentioned that [she] "was part of a dysfunctional cohort . . . we took three required

courses together . . . [and that was] definitely the extent of the cohortness and it made me

question all along, what is a cohort supposed to be? What is its purpose?"

Still others students expressed the sentiment that they were not interested in receiving

their emotional support from the cohort, that their support came from outside of the cohort. Joe

commented that:

emotionally speaking, this is not something that I would as an individual rely upon as

coming from colleagues within a cohort. The emotional supports that I generally need

come from family, maybe some close friends, and maybe more importantly from

members of my committee.

Mary, who was not in a cohort expressed this view:

I did not come to school to be personally supported . . . personal support is something

that, in my estimation, should be coming from a work-life balance where that personal

support comes from my home, my associates that are beyond the scope of my educational

institution.

Cohorts can be a great source of personal support, but only if members of the cohort are

willing to provide those supports. Some cohort members were not, to the same extent, able to

provide the type of emotional support that others did. And, some doctoral students did not see

that as a function of a cohort, they preferred to get their emotional support from outside the

faculty.

Sub-Theme 3: Ad Hoc Students' Perceptions of Belonging to a Cohort

For those students who were not in a cohort, 44% reported that they would have preferred

to be in a cohort rather than an ad hoc program. Of the students who would have liked to be in a

cohort, 78% felt that belonging to a cohort would have provided them with emotional support,

and 62% felt that a cohort group would have provided them with professional support. However,

there were also a number of students who expressed their satisfaction with being in an ad hoc

program, although they did concede that they had no reference for being part of a cohort. The

only thing they could comment on was their experience. Josie said, "one single positive point

about being in an ad hoc, you take courses which are related to your area of study . . . I think it is

good because right from the beginning you focus on what you want to do". Samantha agreed,

"So being an ad hoc PhD, I love it. I choose the courses that I want; I have some freedom in that

sense". And Mary felt that:

> one of the things that being in an ad hoc program allows you to do is see a much larger
>
> range of students studying in different domains rather than look to the students who
>
> might have been in a previous class, or who may be studying in the same area as you, you
>
> can now look at students who are theoretically in different courses, or very different
>
> program and you can look at it from a different perspective, it's much healthier, much
>
> more helpful [than being in a cohort with the same students over and over again] . . . one
>
> of the huge advantages of not being in a cohort is its flexibility, incredible flexibility to
>
> take the courses that are most applicable to you based on your specific, unique project . . .
>
> without having to worry whether these are required courses in this cohort and these are
>
> not . . . [in a cohort] you're seeing the same students repeatedly, you're seeing the same
>
> faculty repeatedly, and this is biasing and limiting your ability to broaden your
>
> knowledge base.

Sub-Theme 4: Concerns related to quality of academic rigour

One of the themes that came out of the survey and the individual interviews was the

perception that faculty in education did not have high enough standards when it came to level of

academic rigour. Josie believed that "when you get your PhD people expect you to know a lot . .

. after five years, six years . . . your life should be different from someone who hasn't studied,

who hasn't spent those five, six years doing the same thing as you were". Joe also commented

on academic rigour:

> perhaps my biggest disappointment with this cohort is how I felt about the level of
>
> scholarly interaction among all the candidates. I really don't feel, quite frankly, that by

and large as a group we were working operationally at the doctoral level. And this for me was a big disappointment. I had an expectation that as a group we would even come into the program reasonably well grounded in the current state of research . . . I was certainly expecting that there would be many vigorous discussions, pithy debates, a real critical eye to strengths and weaknesses within publications . . . quite frankly, by and large, we were operating at the senior undergraduate level, in terms of discussion, the level of scholarly input, and that was a big disappointment for me. I am speaking specifically of the candidates in the doctoral cohort. I simply feel that we should have been pushed by the faculty to be absolutely razor sharp . . . we have to be absolutely on top of our field . . . when you reach the PhD level you have to be ready to be very much challenged . . . that you do the necessary homework to construct appropriate arguments, that you read widely, then moreover that you discuss widely . . . my Master's program was more scholarly than what this program has been in that respect . . . [the PhD students showed] a combination of ill-preparedness . . . perhaps there were too many distractions outside of university life.

On the survey, one of the respondents found that:

Most professors structure their courses around students reading and reporting on book chapters. There is little engagement or meaningful discussion. Some of the students rush into class, finish writing their assignment in a coil bound book, rip it out, and hand it to the prof, and the prof accepts it without comment. That may be acceptable for a grade 8 student, but it is not the level of thought and effort I expect for a graduate student.

And still another student said, "not everyone in our cohort was prepared to be working at the PhD level in education".

Sub-Theme 5: Mix of Doctoral students with Master's students in courses

Another area that emerged from the data with regards to academic rigour was the mix of PhD students, with Master's students, in the majority of classes taken in the Faculty of Education. At the University of Manitoba, the only dedicated PhD courses are in the program area of specialty which is taken with the cohort. The other courses in the support or cognate area, and research methodology are not specifically PhD courses, and so there are both PhD students and Master's students in the same courses. For those students who are not part of a cohort, all of their courses are taken with Master's students.

The concerns mentioned by the doctoral students dealt with the academic rigour of the courses, and the fact that the concerns of the two groups were not the same. Josie said, "I was the only PhD [student] in the course . . . other students I worked with were Master's students so our concerns were not the same". Joe expressed similar feelings when he said, "I would have been helped by greater rigour in class settings . . . the standard of scholarship, in my estimation, was too low . . . just barely operating at a Master's level of depth of treatment and commitment to excellence in thinking at an appropriate depth". One of the online survey respondents said, "most classes were at a Master's level and were not terribly challenging . . . [I would like to see faculty] set the bar higher and your students will achieve more". Another student expressed the same thought, "The mix of Master's and PhD students sometimes lowered the bar". Still another student said:

> It would be helpful to have a doctoral level research course. It would also be helpful if professors would clearly state how doctoral students are evaluated in a Master's level course. Are we expected to perform at the Master's level, which makes it easy to look good, or are we expected to work to a higher level [where] we would learn more?

The views expressed by these students are similar in scope. When taking courses with Master's level students, doctoral students express the fact that the depth and breadth of a topic are not covered to the same degree that they are covered when the class is a dedicated PhD course. In addition, the concerns of Master's level students are not the same as PhD students who are expected to become experts in their areas.

Sub-Theme 6: Scholarly Community

The comments that students made, in this study, concerning scholarly communities was similar to the findings of Pyhalto, Stubb, and Lonka (2009) who found that doctoral students experience of their scholarly community varied: students who perceived themselves as members of their scholarly community experienced their learning environment more positively, were more satisfied with their peers, and were more interested in their studies than those students who felt like they were outsiders in their scholarly community. In their study, Pyhalto, Stubb, and Lonka (2009) also reported that problems in supervision and scholarly community were more prevalent in the behavioural sciences (e.g., education, psychology). The authors speculated that this may have been a result of the fact that doctoral students in these areas are experts in learning, teaching, and pedagogy and thus were more aware of educational practices and communication problems.

> Joe found that it was difficult to feel part of a scholarly community because:
> when you walk through the faculty building you don't feel a sense of an energetic
> environment. Most of the time there is virtually nobody home . . . I have been at other
> universities, where the moment you walked in the door there was a buzz, an excitement,
> an activity that was going on there. That would be something that I would really want to
> see encouraged a bit more here.

Joe thought that perhaps the lack of community was due in part to the fact that:

> we have a unique situation where even those of us who may still have full-time status . . .
>
> unless we are actually involved in the satisfaction of the residency requirement, we are
>
> off campus a great deal . . . doctoral students in other faculties, even just naturally have a
>
> younger profile, different life circumstances, tend to spend a lot of time on campus.

Victoria had similar views:

> but I think when you have part-time students and mainly that is what it is here, you don't
>
> have the same kind of a supportive environment as you do in other faculties . . . I actually
>
> thought that there would be lots of full-time doctoral students who were here during the
>
> day [but that didn't turn out to be the case] . . . most doctoral students in Education are
>
> part-time because they are working full-time.

One respondent on the survey said, "my image of the PhD students meeting at the end of the day to argue through life's most important questions is not a possibility when some of the cohort are full-time and others are part-time . . . responsibilities as parents and partners precludes a complete immersion in the scholarly community". This was echoed by another student who said, "During the week I work. I also live outside of Winnipeg. Both of these factors are counter-productive to establishing a connection to the scholarly community". Still another said, "Most people [students] are part time and are not around the university for conversations outside of class time".

On one of the surveys, the following response was given, "If the question addresses the sense of belonging, then I don't feel that I am a part of a scholarly community". Although the person also said, "I believe it is mostly because of my personality since I don't tend to form relationships easily . . . I think if I was in a cohort group, it would have been easier for me to feel

part of a community". One of the other respondents echoed this statement by saying, "I don't

feel part of a scholarly community because there are few events that (a) ever celebrate our work;

(b) get PhD students together; and, (c) even identify us as PhD students within the faculty".

Another student in responding to the question of feeling part of the scholarly community

said, "I always felt I wasn't as smart as others in the class. It seemed there were a certain few

who were always selected or always ready to input. There was never wait time for others to

think then respond to certain issues". Another expressed similar experiences:

> I feel that people feel forced to brag about experiences and jobs or pretend to understand
>
> the material when they don't because they are afraid they won't appear as 'PhD students'
>
> . . . I guess the assumptions we unconsciously make about PhD students really impacts
>
> the way we learn, interact or react to others in the PhD program.

For many doctoral students the perception was that there was a lack of a scholarly

community at the university. The students, in this study, attributed this to the fact that most

doctoral students in the Faculty of Education are part-time, not full-time, and are therefore not on

campus most of the time. There was also a feeling that there was no one, including faculty,

available for scholarly conversations. As one student put it, "there was nobody home". This was

echoed by the participants in the study conducted by Pyhalto et al., (2012) where one third of the

PhD students felt isolated from their academic community or found the relationship between

themselves and the community somewhat problematic. The students commented that they

thought that their supervisors and other senior members in the faculty would intentionally

facilitate and promote learning through active and student-centred approaches that would help

PhD students to develop their research skills but this did not prove to be the case.

Theme 4: Student Perceptions of Belonging to a Cohort

Students who belonged to a cohort and those who did not belong to a cohort all had their perceptions of what being in a cohort meant. Joe, who was in a cohort, felt that:

there is a certain troublesome indifference [in his cohort] . . . what I really hoped for going into a cohort is that we would actually be founding the beginnings of a group of young scholars . . . I was coming with the conviction that there was going to be an overarching theme, or an overarching vision for this group [the cohort] to actually enter upon some transformational aspects within ourselves . . . as professionals, as individuals, as budding scholars . . . that we would all have connections, one to the other . . . there was a real struggle to really feel that sense of where we wanted to take this group.

Samantha, who was not in a cohort, said, "but I find that sometimes when you are in a cohort you are kind of stuck with your cohort . . . and if it's not going well, there is nothing you can do about it, and that's too bad".

Victoria imagined that things were different in other faculties:

and, I don't know what it's like in other faculties, but I sense that doctoral students who are full-time are mingling with other students in the same field, have offices at the university, do their work here, and feel a part of something. I don't get that sense here at the faculty . . . I thought, maybe mistakenly that I would be part of a doctoral group, not necessarily that we would work together on the same research but dialogue, and I actually thought there would be lots of full-time doctoral students who were here during the day . . . so they have time during the day to discuss, dialogue, debate, whatever, which doesn't occur here . . . I think it would add something to the experience.

Mary, who was not in a cohort, felt that perhaps cohorts:

> would be very helpful to international students who are new to the country, new to
>
> Manitoba, and new to using English or French as their primary language of communication
>
> . . . I also have a suspicion if you are in a group of students who have similar interests, in a
>
> similar area, and they perpetually take courses with each other, and from the same
>
> instructors, there tends to be a regression to the mean, rather than being an independent
>
> scholar who is going to search for the information required to pursue their own studies . . .
>
> being in a cohort, for me, seems prone to being in another Master's program rather than
>
> let's extend this.

Theme 5: Collaboration among peers

When asked if they had the chance to participate collaboratively with their peers at the University of Manitoba, 48% of all students from both cohorts and non-cohorts, agreed or strongly agreed that they had the chance to work collaboratively with their peers. This amounts to slightly less than half of all doctoral students in the Faculty of Education. Students cited lack of time to work with students who were working full-time, and classes held only in the evenings which precluded time to work together on anything but class assignments. Those students who did work collaboratively said that they usually worked with faculty to present, or write papers together. Another reason given for the lack of collaborative writing was the difference in research topics. Joe mentioned this when he commented on the narrowness of PhD studies:

> but the concept of myth in terms of efficiencies as a doctoral student, that everything that
>
> we do, everything that we read, or everything that we write about and so on, is somehow
>
> extraneous if it is not going to have direct implications for our own research program or
>
> our own dissertation . . . we should be willing to read and be discursive widely even across

different education fields . . . I have a certain tacit expectation that faculty should be

willing to push for that breadth of knowledge and understanding.

Samantha also discussed the narrowness of the PhD program:

I wish that I could have taken some classes from curriculum, from social foundations, from

inclusive special ed[ucation] . . . [we are a bit too narrowly focused in education] . . . if I

had taken even one course [in inclusive special ed] it would have helped me be a better

educator . . . [but] you have like eight or nine courses . . . and you have to be proficient in

your department and in your area so you don't get a chance to pick and choose from

different areas.

Theme 6: Traits PhD students need to be successful

Many of the students stressed the need for doctoral students to be independent thinkers

and learners. Other themes that emerged from the data was the need to be self-motivated; the

ability to be goal oriented, so that students can set realistic annual goals and objectives; the

ability to receive constructive criticism without being defensive; and, the ability to persist and

persevere despite obstacles. These findings are similar to the ones reported by Pyhalto et al.,

(2012) where the students identified the following areas as problems they encountered in their

programs: being self-regulated learners, maintaining motivation, self-efficacy beliefs, and

learning to manage their time.

Samantha felt that what a student needed was "tenacity, because you're tired all the time .

. . you have to be passionate about what you are doing or you'd just quit . . . it would become too

much . . . because of the variety of responsibilities you have as a person." Victoria felt that "if

you can't organize yourself, if you can't work independently, if you don't know how to research,

you know you are so out of luck because being a PhD student in Education is a lonely experience

because you are doing it on your own". Becky found that "you have to be committed because you've got those deadline dates and you've got to get it done and you've got to focus". Mary felt that "at the doctoral level, you're independent, you're self-motivated . . . I believe that you must be an independent scholar at the doctoral level". Responses from the online survey also echoed the need to be independent. "Certainly you must be able to work independently, and motivate yourself . . . independently motivated, disciplined . . . good sense of humility . . . perseverance, self-motivation, curiosity, [and a good] work ethic".

Joe said, "one of the most important attributes that a student can have is to have agreed upon reasonable annual goals and objectives . . . [and] the onus is on me, it really rests with the candidate [to take charge of making sure those goals and objectives are in place]".

Mary stressed that doctoral student's need:

the ability to receive constructive criticism, without being defensive . . . you need to be

able to sit with criticism for a moment, to reflect on it, do that self-reflection piece . . .

every piece of criticism is useful - constructive or otherwise, because it sets you through

that self-reflective look to centre and balance yourself once again in relation to your

learning so being able to receive criticism openly is the first step, and then using it to full

advantage . . . therein lies your opportunity to strengthen your research base, to strengthen

your writing, to strengthen your clarity.

Other students found that: "the ability to be "self-motivated, [and] determined to finish

regardless of support, [to] have a full understanding that they [faculty] run their program,

and no one is ensuring the right track for you". And, to have "persistence . . . you must

have persistence in succeeding through adversity". Another student answered that "A PhD

student must have above all perseverance. The PhD program is difficult".

One of the respondents expressed that a PhD student needs to be "goal-oriented, persistent, focused, open-minded, independent, ability to live with ambiguity and lack of closure, [and have] strong communication skills". The sense of the need for independence was stressed by one student who said, "what you seek needs to come from within your personal strength".

The traits mentioned by the doctoral students as something that a PhD student needs to succeed were varied, but the main consensus seemed to be that students needed to take charge of their own learning, and not depend on anyone else.

Theme 7: How to make the PhD program in the Faculty of Education more student

centred

Some of the comments on the survey, and in the individual interviews, touched on ways that they felt the PhD program could be improved. The need for more information on the program and the supports that are needed would have been helpful as mentioned by three of the respondents: "A more detailed orientation to the aims or goals of the cohort [would have helped] . . . [as well as a] more detailed and interactive session or sessions on the use of the library services, and the university online services like Aurora, Jump, [online platforms] etc." And, [students] need informational sessions or pamphlets listing what a new student needs" Also, "more information about the mine field that is protocol, policy, and the game of completing [your degree]".

Two students mentioned that "more input and direction on scholarly writing [would have helped], and "I also wish I had more training in writing since I struggle so much with writing professionally and academically while at the same time keeping and representing my own voice". In addition, "having an academic network would really strengthen the sense of belonging and support [in the program]".

There was mention of having a mentorship program in the faculty that would pair new students with students who had already completed their degree, or with someone that was almost finished their degree. Becky said, "I'm wondering if in first-year they could set up a mentoring system of some kind, I don't know if that would work or not, so that as people are moving through, they've always got one person that they can go and talk to". Mary also felt that:

> mentorship is hugely important in keeping those students who have difficulty staying on task, those students who get easily dissuaded from where they are going . . . I think it is also very good for any student to know that there is somebody else who has been there, done that, been successful, and survived it . . . so having PhD students who have completed their PhD, then agreeing to volunteer as mentors, I think, would be an absolutely brilliant move to take.

Conclusion

The Faculty of Education, at the University of Manitoba, is perhaps unique in that the majority of the doctoral students are part-time rather than full-time. Doctoral students tend to have full-time jobs outside of the university environment thus necessitating graduate level courses to be held in the evenings when students have already been at work all day. In addition, there are virtually no teaching assistant, or research assistant, positions within the faculty. The combination of these two circumstances could account for the disconnect that doctoral students feel between each other, and between faculty members. It could also explain why doctoral students often do not feel that they are part of a scholarly community. By the time they get on campus, the offices are closed, and administrators and professors have already gone home. It is difficult to become part of a community if there is no one to interact with except fellow students who may be feeling the same way.

At the University of Manitoba, the Associate Dean of Graduate Studies made an effort to hold bi-monthly doctoral student meetings perhaps in an attempt to get doctoral students to interact with each other. However, the timing of the meetings, and the infrequency in which they were held, often lead to frustration on the part of the doctoral students. The students commented that they would like to be able to attend and discuss topics of interest with other students, but the stress of jobs and family often makes this impossible for them. The meetings are scheduled during the evening when many students are on campus, but in classes. In addition, even if doctoral students wanted to attend dissertation proposal defences, or dissertation defences they often cannot since they take place during the day when many doctoral students are busy in their own jobs.

Another area of concern for doctoral students is the lack of preparation for graduate school. It is their perception that departments did not take an active role in helping students make the transition to graduate school. Just as Golde (2005) found, "departments did not endeavour to ensure that incoming students knew what they were in for [when they began their programs]". Doctoral students expressed a desire to have had some kind of orientation when they began. They expressed the view that it would have been helpful for doctoral students to learn: what was required in the program; how to go about asking questions; how to choose an advisor; and, what exactly the doctoral program entailed. Perhaps faculty assume that students will be able to discern all that they need to know from reading the guidelines put out by the departments. However, that was not the case for most students who would have liked some assistance in determining exactly what they would be expected to do.

In addition to having an orientation, students also mentioned that having a mentor who was either almost finished the program, or a recent graduate of the program, would have been

very helpful in providing support to the student. Being able to question a mentor about what was happening, or what was going to happen could have alleviated some of the stress and uncertainty that students felt in the program. This was especially true when the students had finished all of their courses, and had embarked on the lonely journey of researching their topic, and ultimately writing their dissertation. The doctoral students expressed a desire to be able to dialogue with someone who had successfully gone through what they were going through. Gibbons (1992) said that mentoring is crucial to career development in many ways, including helping young academics make contacts and learn professional skills.

When the themes were identified, a picture of the doctoral students' perceptions of the PhD program in the Faculty of Education, at the University of Manitoba, began to emerge. The themes focussed on topics such as the faculty members and their role in the PhD program, the scholarly community of learners, the advantages and disadvantages of belonging to a cohort, and, the traits that students felt were needed if students were going to be successful. It became apparent that for the doctoral students in the Faculty of Education, it was important to have some kind of personal and professional support. That support could come from various sources. The doctoral students who were most satisfied with the program, in the Faculty of Education, said that the level of support they received was the most important factor for their continued success in their program. The support was not tied to only one person, but came from a variety of sources: faculty members; committee members; peers; and, the meetings with the Associate Dean. It appears that it did not matter where the support came from; students just needed some type of support. If they did not get it in one area, then they needed to get it from another area. The students who conveyed the impression that they had less support often had suggestions for how to improve the program.

One of the ways that was mentioned as a way to improve the program was to form a scholarly community where students were able to meet, talk, and discuss issues that they had read about, with other like-minded individuals. This was difficult for students due to the fact that most of the doctoral students in the Faculty of Education are part-time, and are therefore not available to meet during the day for the type of interaction that would foster a scholarly community. In contrast, some doctoral students perceived there was a scholarly community, because of the support of their professors in encouraging students to present, and publish their papers. This seeming contradiction of the perceptions of students speaks more to the support of faculty for some students and the perceived lack of support available from other faculty.

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