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Resisting the Pressures of Academia: The Importance of Including Care in Doctoral Study

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Abstract: This study examines the effects of caring relationships in doctoral study. An exploration of the experiences of first year female students showed care facilitated learning.

Key Words: doctoral study, socio-emotional learning, care, first year female students, feminist research

Introduction

This study seeks to describe and elaborate the conditions for the success of female doctoral students in their first year of study. The research also explored the role of socio-emotional learning (SEL) as foundational to their successes. Central to this investigation was a feminist approach and lens that "endorse[d] modes of research that are directed at the needs rather than the shortcomings and peculiarities of subjects … call[ing] for a science for women" (Noddings, 1988, p. 227). In this approach, participants are the source of knowledge and are able to identify issues of significance. In looking at the circumstances of women in the first year of doctoral study, we followed Noddings suggestion for researchers to focus on "what [participants] need to engage in such work comfortably" (p. 227), rather than highlighting sources of failure. Participants voiced their needs arising out of their own experiences, recognizing that they acknowledged the importance of caring relationships and made capable decisions. They recognized how the caring relationships they developed were essential to their success as doctoral students.

Literature Review

The development of an identity as a successful doctoral student is related to several factors, all of which have been researched. The relationship between identity development and

socialization (Golde, 2000; McAlpine, Jazvac-Martek, & Hopwood, 2009), coping mechanisms and support structures (Byers et al., 2014), the influence of advisors and faculty (Barnes & Austin, 2009; Golde, 2000), and the role of family and friends (Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Sweitzer, 2009) are areas that influence success and perceived success as a doctoral student.

Pushing beyond traditional academic parameters, Elias (2003) defined socio-emotional learning (SEL) skills as "a set of abilities that allows students to work with others, learn effectively, and serve essential roles in their families, communities and places of work" (p. 3). In this way, learners' needs are broadened to include areas such as collaboration, emotional intelligence, and relationship building (Elias et. al., 1997; Elias, 2003, 2006). This expansion of the traditional parameters offers important opportunities for diverse student populations (Zins, & Elias, 2007; Hoffman, 2009). While the original intent of SEL was implementation in the K12 setting, there is important work to be done at the level of higher education as well, especially concerning social support, transitions, writing ability, and the development of essential relationships (Eccles, Devis-Rozental, & Mayer, 2016; Kasworm, 2008; O'Meara, Knudsen, Jones, 2013; Tompkins, Brecht, & Tucker, 2016; Vandervoort, 2006). According to Elias, SEL uses goal setting and varied pedagogical strategies to increase empathy, build emotional intelligence, and find success in positive relationships (Elias et. al., 1997; Elias, 2003, 2006).

Nodding's (1988) ethics of care combined agapism and feminism to reorient teaching and learning towards trusting relationships. The implication of trusting relationships is that they are only built over time. Noddings recognized the challenges for higher education in this regard. Specifically, she noted a relentless focus on evaluation and measurement oriented towards competition, winning, and accruing more of whatever achieves victory. This focus ". . . contributes to the proliferation of problems and malaise" (Noddings, 1988, p. 226). Noddings (1988) seminal work in defining and elaborating the ethic of caring is essential to teaching, both in terms of method and in terms of content. Her later works, *Educating Moral People: A Caring Alternative to Character Education* (2002) and *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (2013) argued against a solipsistic and individualized educational practice. Instead, she framed a relational approach with care at its core.

Several researchers have elaborated Noddings' framework to study students at a community college (Barrow, 2015), graduate students' beliefs about teaching (Hill, 2014), and adult learners as graduate students (Rossiter, 1999). More directly related to our study is research into the nature and role of care in mentoring relationships (Johnson and Huwe, 2002; Hansman, 2003), power dynamics in mentoring relationships (Corwin, Cohen, Ciechanowski, & Orozco, 2011/2012), organic mentoring for historically marginalized groups (Harris, 2016), and feminist co-mentoring (McGuire & Reder, 2003).

Learning care, as framed by Feeley (2014) and built on work by Lynch and McLaughlin (1995), emphasized the important role that affective learning plays in the educational transaction. Teachers learning a skillful and respectful approach to educating through caring will empower learners to be more hopeful and confident as they enter into learning situations. Importantly, the role of the affective domain in the learning process has been convincingly studied in the context of achieving social justice (Lynch, Baker, & Lyons, 2009), educational ideology (Lynch, Lyons, & Cantillon, 2007), gender stereotypes (Gannerud, 2001; Drudy, 2008), feminism and relational responsibility (McLeod, 2015), developing care in educators and social workers (Hermsen and Embregts, 2015), and the views of teachers and students on the effects of caring (Carnell, 2007).

This study seeks to fill a gap in this literature base by studying the role of care in the experiences of first year female doctoral students. In particular, it examines the caring relationships of students in two education doctoral programs, supporting Noddings' position on the importance of care in education, including at the highest level.

Methods

As a female doctoral student returning to academic study after a thirty-year career in education and a male professor who mentored female students in an adult education doctoral program, we were interested in the lived experience of women entering the traditionally male sphere of academia. We wanted to understand how these women navigated the field, including by establishing supportive and mentoring relationships, as they trained to become scholars within the institution. We conducted a phenomenological study, interviewing seven women who were studying for Ph.D. and Ed. D. degrees in educational leadership and lifelong learning. Our participants included both young women who were pursuing academic study outside of traditional family focused women's roles, women who were simultaneously juggling academic and conventional family obligations, and women who had returned to scholarly pursuits at a point after they had largely moved through those customary roles. We explored how formal and informal caring relationships offered support to doctoral students; we investigated the presence of relationality in teaching and learning at the graduate level; we examined how female doctoral students used socio-emotional skills to find success.

Using what Van Manen (1984) described as the "elemental methodological structure" of phenomenology (p. 39), we began with the topic of doctoral students and care, "a phenomenon which seriously interest[ed] us … investigat[ed] experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it; reflect[ed] on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon; [and] describe[ed] the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting" (p. 39). The initial

themes were uncovered by answering Van Manen's (1984) question, "What statements or phrases seem particularly essential or revealing about the experience being described?" (p. 61). We found 19 themes described in the words of our participants and extracted several related to caring relationships including: service, justice, family, community, mentoring, success, and frustration. We then delineated elements of care by examining Noddings' (1988, 2002, 2005) ethics of care, Feeley's (2014) learning care, and Elias's (2003, 2006) socio-emotional learning. These elements were deductively applied to the collected data. For this process, we used Quirkos, a qualitative analysis software program. In the transcripts, we looked for examples of socio-emotional traits such as self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision-making, self-management, and relationship skills (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning - CASEL). We found instances of participants being cared for, caring for others and caring about public issues and the essential components of care described by Noddings as modelling, dialogue, practice and confirmation (Smith, 2004/2016). Features of learning care such as respect, recognition, power, resources, and solidarity were evident (Feeley, 2014). Some of the subthemes identified included emotion, self-perception, strengths, self-confidence, self-efficacy, perspective, empathy, diversity, problem solving, reflection, ethics, discipline, motivation, goals, organization, communication, engagement, and developing relationships.

Findings

This study revealed the importance of care in doctoral study. These doctoral students recognized that "learning requires care" (Elias, 2003, p. 8), and they developed relationships within their academic community to support each other. Nancy described the student group as "so supportive of each other. We text each other. We're on a group chat. We email each other. We share ideas. We pick each other up when somebody's feeling like [she] can't do this … We're tight … that's definitely helpful." Nikki said, "[B]uilding those relationships is very valuable. It expands your network but it also helped me increase my learning curve too." The participants recognized the value of programs supporting these caring relationships and providing opportunities for students to interact and build connections. Self-awareness and self-management were both essential to establishing caring relationships as the doctoral students juggled the demands of their family, their jobs and their studies.

The students also voiced their belief that faculty relationships were significant as Evelyn pointed out, "I think meeting with faculty regularly, keeping a connection is something I really have to do … and with an advisor it should be more of a collaborative arrangement rather than the student driving everything or the faculty driving everything." Their relationships with faculty members illustrated Feeley's (2014) claim that "learning care is less about sentiment and

more about skilled, respectful learning facilitation" (p. 168). Students learned how to learn at the doctoral level from their teachers and advisors and recognized that they belonged in the program through their acceptance by faculty as Rose said, "I would say by and large people are kind of impressed when you say you are going [to pursue a doctorate] because it's an intimidating amount of work … and now I felt like I'm on my way to owning that title because I respect [my advisor] and if he thinks that I'm on the path and I'm hitting the marks then that means something to me because he knows more about this than I do." Faculty praise and caring provided the students with validation and reassurance that their decision to study at such a high level was the right one.

The choice to study education is reflected in the importance of care to the participants.   These women were pursuing doctoral degrees with an acknowledgment of the importance of care that reflects the aims of feminist research including "empowerment and emancipation for women and other marginalized groups, and feminist researchers often apply their findings in the service of promoting social change and social justice" (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 4) As Sue pointed out, in her previous studies, "nobody was interested in talking about the marginalized" and this led to her interest in adult education. With care, the participants are finding success in their doctoral work as they were often motivated by their care for others. Currently "care is often unrecognized, undervalued and overshadowed" (Feeley, 2014 p. 157) in graduate programs. If "[e]ffective, lasting academic and social-emotional learning is built upon caring relationships and warm but challenging classroom and school environments" (Elias, 2006, p. 7), then there needs to be more focus on the importance of care in doctoral study.

Conclusion

By taking a feminist approach to relationship building in doctoral study, we discovered "new sources of knowledge and understanding precisely within the lived experiences, interpretations, subjectivities, and emotions" (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 12) of female doctoral students.   These students identified care as an important element leading to their success. Findings that reveal first year doctoral students' use of socio-emotional skills to create supportive relationships acknowledged their experiences, giving them a voice in academic study and may provide an opportunity to enhance their chances to achieve success through drawing attention to the need to facilitate caring relationships in graduate study.

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