Title: From student to graduate: four learners' perspectives of the professional doctorate journey

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'From Student to Graduate: Four Learners' Perspectives of the Professional Doctorate Journey'

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Abstract

This paper considers the experiences and perspectives of four female academics who are the first graduates of a new Professional Doctorate programme at a University in the South West of England. We position ourselves simultaneously as researchers and research participants, engaging in collaborative autoethnography to critically reflect on our experiences. We identify a number of key issues including the need to navigate some significant shifts in identity throughout the doctorate, and how the course structure and peer relationships supported each of us to reach our end goal – the successful completion of our studies. The paper concludes with a discussion of the potential implications of our experiences for leaders of

Professional Doctorates. These include student/lecturer contracts and actively facilitating opportunities for students to establish relationships for peer support.

Authors' biographies

Helen Goodall is a part-time Senior Lecturer at the University of St Mark and St John and also works independently in the field of professional and organisational development. Her doctorate explored Professional Development: A Participative Study of a Self-facilitated Learning Group.

Valerie Huggins is an Associate Professor in Early Childhood Studies at Plymouth University. Since gaining a doctorate, she has taken on senior leadership roles in teaching and learning and internationalisation. Her doctorate considered the extent to which international study visits promoted the intercultural capabilities of the students who participated.

Louise Webber is a Lecturer in Early Childhood Studies at Plymouth University. Initially she was employed in a Further Education College but after completing her Doctorate wanted to pursue a more research focused teaching career. Her doctorate focused on Mature Women and Higher Education: Reconstructing Identity and Family Relationships.

Karen Wickett is a Lecturer in Early Childhood Studies at Plymouth University. At the beginning of the doctorate she was employed part time in a Children's Centre as a teacher and at Plymouth University as a lecturer. Her doctorate explored Beliefs and Relationships during the Transition to School: Parents, Practitioners and Teachers.

Introduction

Research into Professional Doctorates has mostly been conducted by academics that lead or teach these programmes (Pratt et al, 2015). In such research, doctoral students are generally positioned as subjects (see McAlpine and Lucas, 2010; Malfroy and Yates, 2003). In contrast, this paper presents four students' perspectives of the doctoral journey. As recent graduates of the same Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) at a university in the South West of England, we position ourselves simultaneously as researchers and research participants.

We are four mature women who entered higher education (HE) through non-traditional routes. We started our undergraduate and masters' degrees later in life and began our careers in HE after practising in other fields of education. We have busy personal lives and families that have expectations of us and make demands on our time. Nevertheless, we all take pleasure in learning and in facilitating others' learning.

When beginning the programme two of us were employed by the university providing the EdD, and two of us were not: this difference clearly impacted on our doctoral journeys. Other differences between us - our professional interests, ambitions and our commitments outside work - are also relevant to this discussion.

We have used a form of collaborative autoethnography for our research. This is a qualitative methodology that is context-conscious and focuses on the self (Ngunjiri et al, 2010). Autoethnography is often criticised for its subjectivity but, as Denzin (2014) points out...

Experience, lived and otherwise, is discursively constructed ... hence, there can never be a clear unambiguous statement of anything, including ... meaning (Denzin, 2014: 2).

In autoethnography it is assumed that the writer is well-positioned to write about herself but critical self-reflection is essential (Denzin, 2014). For collaborative autoethnographers, it is important both to retain and move beyond the critical self-reflection associated with autoethnography and to work as a team, providing support for each other as ideas are interrogated (Chang et al, 2013). Trust and trustworthiness are essential between collaborators to facilitate frank exchanges and, as will become evident later, this approach reflects the mutually supportive relationships that we established as doctoral students. Furthermore, honest and open exchanges must be ethically conducted: in collaborative autoethnography confidentiality, informed consent and the avoidance of harm to others (including, in this case, the providers of our doctoral programme) must be strictly observed (Chang et al, 2013).

In this endeavour, we talked, wrote, shared our writing and talked again. Through our conversations, we identified significant periods of transition that we experienced as learners, as professionals and in our personal lives, both during and after the EdD. The first period of transition was encountered as we entered the programme; the second as we navigated our way through it, and lastly, the final transition took us through our vivas and out of the EdD. These transitional periods have been used to structure the paper and extracts from our individual narratives are used to illuminate our discussion. We end the paper by drawing some

tentative conclusions, highlighting the implications of our work for leaders of similar Professional Doctorates.

Transitioning into the EdD

This first transitional period encompassed our decision-making processes for choosing to undertake a professional doctorate and was the starting point for the identity shifts that we each encountered during the programme.

Becoming a doctoral student

Our decisions to embark on a part-time doctoral programme were influenced by our motivation to learn and by those around us:

> *I chose the EdD as I was looking to extend my knowledge but also to challenge myself and to 'see how far I could go' (Louise).*

> *I completed my MA two years before beginning an EdD programme and was keen to undertake further and more in-depth research (Helen).*

Studying at doctorate level provided us with opportunities to challenge ourselves and to become apprentice researchers (Park, 2005); learning about research and developing the skills to carry it out. Our motivation was further fuelled by the enthusiasm of those around us who had already started their doctorates:

> *My colleague ... had started her EdD the previous year. [Her] enthusiasm for her learning was infectious. This contributed to my motivation for doing a doctorate (Karen).*

> *I had fairly recently moved into a part-time lecturing post in HE and was influenced by the enthusiasm of several colleagues already engaged in doctoral studies (Helen).*

We chose to follow the professional doctorate route based on our perceptions of ourselves as learners, our life styles, and the value we placed on learning with peers.

Although we were enthusiastic learners, there was also some anxiety about studying at doctorate level:

> *In the past I had always doubted my capabilities and took my education in little steps, so embarking on the doctorate was a huge risk in terms of self-confidence and transformation (Louise).*

> *I had not had a successful school career and had often been described as 'a practical person and not academic'. I saw the first assignments as an opportunity to build my confidence and change my views of myself as a learner (Karen).*

It was important to us that the first two years of the programme were taught in groups; we saw this phase as an opportunity to establish relationships with our fellow learners:

*I was keen to be part of a group of learners sharing ideas, providing each
other with support and expanding my educational perspectives beyond my
comfort zone (Valerie).*

*Establishing connections and peer support from others was important
(Louise).*

The benefits of social learning are well-documented (Baker et al, 2002; Downs, 2009; Race, 2005) and an EdD provides more opportunities for it than would a PhD, which can be a much more individual and isolating experience (Klenowski et al., 2011).

Each assignment during the taught phase provided a building block in the process of reconstructing our views of ourselves as learners and in fostering our confidence. The EdD structure was also similar to our previous experiences of learning:

*The EdD followed a similar 'delivery' format to my MA - several weekends
over the course of an academic year - following a pattern with which I
was familiar (Helen).*

This sense of familiarity was reassuring as we began a new programme with different expectations, relationships and content. Finally, practical issues also shaped our decisions to study an EdD at our chosen university:

*I deliberately chose a university close to home for the EdD. I wanted to
minimise additional pressures such as travelling time (Helen).*

Practically, as I had two part-time jobs, [by] studying on the EdD programme

I believed the schedule would be ... manageable and achievable to meet my

end goal of being awarded a doctorate (Karen).

We all had to balance home-life, work and postgraduate study, which is challenging by nature (Kember, 1999). We perceived that the location and the schedule of the EdD programme would minimise potential barriers and strengthen the likelihood of achieving a doctorate.

Insider/outsider experiences

During our doctoral journeys we all experienced being 'insiders' and 'outsiders' in a variety of ways, both as students and in our ongoing professional worlds. Hellawell (2006: 490) highlights that there is 'not one continuum but a multiple series of parallel ones' when conducting a research degree. Each continuum (such as ethnicity, gender, and class) has a different function and, depending on the function, the researcher experiences differing degrees of 'insiderness'. In addition to these functions, during the doctorate journey we experienced varying levels of 'insiderness' on the 'researcher' and 'academic' continua:

The position of researcher was not expected as part of my job role, [it] had

not been offered to me before (Louise).

Louise was in the process of crossing into an unknown territory of research: having worked in HE but in a Further Education context, she felt an outsider on the research continuum when she began the EdD (see Walkerdine, 2006).

Having come from a primary and early years teaching background and consultancy, I was still uncertain about pedagogy in Higher Education. The EdD seemed to offer the possibility to problematise what I was doing and how I was doing as an HE lecturer (Valerie).

We had all started to teach in HE after professional careers in other educational sectors and we all had some sense of being outsiders to the HE academic community. Embarking on a doctorate enabled us to challenge our own and others' perceptions in this respect, and to travel along the academic continuum to become an insider in the HE context. Mercer (2007) recognises that features which can determine one's position on the various continua are constantly shifting and, as we progressed through the EdD programme, our own levels of 'insiderness' and 'outsiderness' as researchers and academics shifted significantly.

Transitioning during the EdD

As we transitioned through the different elements of the EdD programme, from the initial interview, to the taught modules and into our thesis, we experienced the identity change one would expect, given that learning is inseparable from identity or position (Biesta et al., 2011). Although education can seem like a safe space to reconstruct identity (Parr, 2001), we discovered this transformation can also cause discomfort and be an emotionally intense experience (Mezirow, 2000). There were three main areas of identity change and

transformation for us during the EdD: in our professional lives, in our personal lives and as learners when progressing from the taught to the thesis stage.

Identity change and transitions in our professional lives

The intensity of studying at doctoral level and dealing with uncertainties about our own knowledge base left us feeling exhilarated and, at times, confused. We began to question things we had previously taken for granted (see Bolton, 2005). This led to transformations in our professional lives (see also Wellington and Sikes, 2006) and in our teaching practice: we began to do things differently. Our developing levels of understanding and knowledge together with a growth in self-confidence during the EdD enabled us to move along the academic continuum mentioned earlier. However, our experiences were not uniform; three of us became more confident whereas one of us lost confidence for a while:

> *My confidence as a teacher grew as I used my new insights and understanding (Karen).*

> *My identities as an EY teacher and HE lecturer were shaken up which affected my confidence in supporting learners (Valerie).*

Changes in our family relationships

For one of us, transformations in her thinking and perspectives had a detrimental impact on her home life and family relationships (Wellington and Sikes, 2006). These changes were not

always welcomed and caused tension which intensified during the thesis stage of the programme:

> *Dealing with the emotional fall out at home, as a result of my changing perspective and changes to routine due to study commitments were harder to cope with than the EdD itself (Louise).*

Feelings of isolation and detachment from family, friends or work colleagues can be deepened if learners have no one with whom to share the journey (Baker and Pifer, 2015). Meeting in a self-selected peer group offered us a space to make meaning of the changes that were occurring:

> *… being able to rely on the support of my peers was essential in helping me to cope with identity transformation (Louise).*

> *… belonging to an informal small group that met regularly offered what felt like a safe and supportive space in which to ask for and offer ideas, suggestions and advice, both in respect of EdD-related issues and the wider personal and professional challenges we were simultaneously navigating (Helen).*

For three of us, having a colleague (Valerie) a year ahead of us in the programme enabled us to make sense of what was going to happen next on our EdD journey:

> *I would share Valerie's doctorate progress - the transfer viva, submitting, viva etc - with Helen and Louise (Karen).*

During the taught phase of the doctorate, tutors had encouraged us to engage with our group via online forums. Whilst peer support can be developed through online forums, these can also be problematic:

> *We were encouraged to blog to share ideas in between sessions but this rarely happened … writing down my confused thoughts and exposing them to the judgment of others was too scary for me and I think for many of the group as there was little engagement (Valerie).*

The thesis stage of the programme

On moving to the thesis stage, we felt that the support of our peer group was even more essential:

> *This group offered a 'we' that helped me to negotiate the isolation of being an 'I', as far as my thesis-writing was concerned (Helen).*

The thesis stage offered fewer opportunities for scheduled group collaboration, leaving learners more exposed to potential isolation. Membership of the small peer group helped to sustain and develop our motivation and momentum.

We all agree that relationships with supervisors whilst we undertook our individual research were important in terms of keeping up the momentum of our studies and helping us to develop confidence in our research skills and abilities:

The relationship with my two supervisors was very significant in helping me to transition from the taught elements of the programme to the more independent thesis element … their constructive questions and challenging enabled me to become more confident in critically analysing my own work (Helen).

Even with this support, one of us felt unable to go to her supervisor to share the challenges of identity change or a crisis in confidence as she felt this positioned her as not coping. Learners may feel reluctant to share anything that they perceive will make them look weak, or may assume that HE staff are more interested in the academic rather than the affective domain (Stagg and Krimmins, 2014). Further complications arose for those of us that were insiders in the institution when colleagues and fellow researchers became our doctoral supervisors, causing a change in how we were positioned (Gergen, 2009) and some uncertainty as to the nature of this newly-constructed relationship.   These scenarios sometimes motivated us to turn to peers for support, rather than our supervisors.

The sheer pressure of completing the thesis stage, grappling with changing levels of confidence and our new, emerging identities as researchers caused turmoil for some of us:

Transitioning to the thesis stage was like stepping off the high board of a swimming pool. Often … I was unsure – I felt as if I was bobbing about rudderless and could not see the way to the end point. When we met, we were able to share our challenges and losses (past relationships/past identities etc.) (Karen).

Here, as with the other professional and personal challenges and identity changes experienced during the programme, the peer group provided essential in support in a way that family members or supervisors could not.

Transitioning through the viva and out the other side

What we discuss here as our final period of transition began with the submission of our completed theses. Despite the subsequent requirement to defend our respective submissions, 'handing in' felt like a major milestone that took us closer to the completion of our professional doctorates. This section therefore includes our experiences of the viva and beyond.

Experiences of the viva

Recognising it as a significant transition point on the way to exiting an EdD, all of us approached the viva with the expected mix of trepidation, fear and anxiety, yet also seeing it as one more step to the end. We all wanted to 'get it done' by this stage, keen to get on with other projects and to have some free time in our lives. We found that the mock viva, a rehearsal with our supervisors, was excellent preparation, and fitted with the collaborative approach to our studies. Rehearsing responses to questions and having to articulate the deep learning that had taken place through our research gave us confidence during the viva itself, and alerted us to potential tricky questions. This meant there were less surprises and, for more than one of us, the viva turned out to be a very enjoyable experience.

Valerie was the very first participant on the new EdD programme to get to the viva stage. The programme leader paced outside the room like an expectant father. She realised at that point how much had been invested by the academic team in her success; Valerie's was potentially the first doctorate awarded after nearly six years. Anyone who takes on the leadership of an EdD programme has to be in it for the long haul.

The opportunity to talk at length with supervisors in a debrief after the viva was a key part of the transition out of the EdD. It was a time to share the emotional relief and joy of the achievement. For all of us, the external validation of our research was part of the transition to researcher. A sense of legitimacy came through strongly in our post-doc narratives:

> *I can remember the feeling of lightness and delight ... I was less of a fraud working at the University ... maybe I feel I belong to the club... (Karen).*

The final submission of the thesis, the walk onto the graduation stage, watched by our proud families, the end of the doctorate, led to further shifts in our professional identities. We moved from teacher to early career researcher, from learner to 'post-doc'. We talked at length in our discussions for this article about our use of the title 'Doctor' in our professional and personal lives. For each of us it represents something slightly different and the degree to which we are comfortable with using it varies. Having worked so hard for it, why are we sometimes hesitant, reluctant, even embarrassed, to put it forward as a significant part of who we are? It was evident from our shared narratives that we are all still moving along the

insider/outsider academic continuum (Mercer, 2007), with its associated personal shifts in perceptions of ourselves.

For some of us, the relief at finally achieving our goal was replaced with a sense of loss, along with uncertainties about our next steps. There was a feeling of burnout for one of us, as though she was not able to reach that level of writing again. All of us felt the need for space and time for other things that had been neglected whilst we pursued our doctoral goal, yet we were aware of the pressure to publish from our theses before the research became dated. The motivation and drive that got us through the doctorate now had to push us towards other goals.

We found our new doctoral status afforded us opportunities not previously available, some more unexpected than others. One of us found that she no longer 'fitted' in her institution and, once again, peer group support proved invaluable. Her engagement in ongoing critical dialogue with peers enabled her to try out ideas, discuss changing perspectives and safely test out who she was becoming. This gave her the confidence to seek out new opportunities which would not have been available to her without a doctorate. The conversations with peers on the programme had provided a learner-led third space (Hilsdon, 2014); "a transformative space to test out who I was becoming" (Louise). This acknowledges that the shift in perspective was a personal one; the stories she was telling about herself were different.

Two of us managed to write successfully for publication during the doctorate,

subsequently having peer-reviewed articles published in international journals which did much to strengthen our confidence as academics. Having completed an EdD, we all shared the sense that our participation in the academic community of practice had legitimacy, as we shifted from the periphery to the centre (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Three of us aimed to orientate more towards research but it has been hard to make the shift alongside the constraints of heavy workloads. Valerie, in particular, has found this disappointing and has still not achieved a solo-authored article in a peer-reviewed journal.

Gaining the doctorate for Valerie was influential in being promoted to Associate Professor. The doctorate itself was seen as necessary in developing as a lecturer and, as such, did not appear to be given much value. What was valued however was that it was an EdD, with its focus on theory into practice; that it had been gained while maintaining the day job; that the learning was influencing and enhancing her work with learners; and that it demonstrated her potential as a researcher in education. Helen was not looking for further career progression, having studied the doctorate as an end in itself, and yet found it gave her the credentials and the self-confidence to apply for a new position: another shift in identity.

Conclusions: implications for management and leadership

Although this paper discusses a very small-scale study with only four participants, it resonates with much of the previous research on the experiences of doctoral learners. Identity shift emerges here as a central theme and, 'part of the lived complexity of a person's project' (Clegg, 2008: 329). We are unsurprised to have experienced such identity shifts, accepting that

'doing a doctorate changes you' (Barnacle and Mewburn, 2010: 433). However, we had not anticipated the extent of the change and its impact on our lives.

For us, the doctoral journey began with being exposed to the positive opinions of the pedagogy and ethos of the programme held by those already engaged in it. What we heard from other learners definitely influenced our decisions to embark on the EdD far more than any other programme publicity and there are clear implications for recruitment.

The structure of the programme not only attracted us but helped to retain our engagement, scaffolding our learning and building our confidence as we progressed. The social element of the programme, learning with and from fellow participants, was important in developing our knowledge and understanding. However, the concept of a knowledge community is not the same as that of a community of practice (Seaman, 2008) and leaders of professional doctorates might consider how they can successfully foster both. Whilst some learners on EdD programmes may struggle with forming relationships or support networks with their peers, or not see this as desirable, membership of a small peer group where we were able to receive both academic and emotional support was critical to our sustained engagement.

The need for collegial reflective space in which there is mutual trust is clearly identified in our narratives and, we would argue, should not be left to chance. With hindsight, had we as learners understood how important such peer support would be for us, we might have taken steps to be more inclusive of other cohort members. As it was, we did not share the necessary

level of trust with the whole group for this to seem like a natural or easy proposition. For trust to develop in any new group, early agreement on its 'ground rules' is likely to be the most important action it will perform (Armstrong, 2004). Programme leaders might consider how best to facilitate wider membership of supportive peer groups, perhaps by providing structured time to allow groups to establish their own 'ground rules'. In turn, this could pave the way for participants to share their hopes, concerns and expectations for the programme, benefitting both learners and programme tutors.

The relationships with our thesis supervisors clearly impacted on all of us for different reasons. Again, establishing 'ground rules' between supervisors and learner at the outset of the relationship, in which expectations and boundaries are clearly articulated, is likely to be beneficial to all parties. Our own experiences suggest that close attention should be given to the matching of supervisors with doctoral learners, particularly if learners are 'insiders' and in positions where they are teaching or researching alongside colleagues that are also tutors on their programme of study.

Our individual experiences of transitioning out of the EdD have been varied but we would argue that recent graduates need support as they negotiate the tricky terrain of publishing from their theses, building on their doctoral success, or taking on different professional roles as a result of their new status. The challenge for universities sponsoring their academics through EdD programmes, having invested in them a considerable amount of time and money, lies in how to support them, post-doctorate, to achieve their potential. EdD

programme leads perhaps share that challenge but with a wider remit that includes all programme participants, not just those from their own institution. Some work on 'future thinking' and career planning as part of the EdD professional identity work would be beneficial to individuals and, where relevant, to participants' institutions or sponsors. From our experience, continuing opportunities to meet in a safe dialogic space to make sense of our new identities have been crucial to moving on.

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