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How we got here

This special issue, *Lived experiences of doctoral students through an equity lens,* of the *Education Review* features intimate reflections from our peer community, that is, PhD candidates in the Faculty of Education who started their studies in the Fall of 2021. We found ourselves beginning graduate studies in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic, and with emergency remote learning still in full effect, we began our studies from our homes. Virtually connecting over video conference software in mandatory PhD-level courses once or twice a week over the first fall and winter semesters brought forward surprising connections and friendships in intimate "classrooms" without ever leaving our homes. Remote learning was not what we had expected (or what many had hoped for) and presented its own challenges, however, many of us have since built strong friendships which help sustain us across our studies through the comprehensive exam and thesis proposal milestones of our degrees. This is even when some of us have yet to meet each other in person three years later! For our cohort, we think it is fair to say that the PhD experience has not felt like the "alone together paradox" that is common for online learning; for us, it has been mostly "apart but together" (Graham et al., 2023, p. 301). Everyone is on their own journey through the doctorate, but we are connected through our commitment, perseverance, and resilience borne out of our initial decision to undertake the degree.

In creating a caring and authentic community together, we were able to share honest academic and personal advice, support, and companionship. Additionally, this safe space allowed us to critically evaluate the positive and challenging aspects of the system we found ourselves in, specifically the higher education sector in Ontario. Given how productive these conversations were, we wanted to extend this conversation to the greater community. With this in mind, we (Derya and Jenny) decided to shoulder this project and be the volunteer co-editors to make our ideas reach beyond the bounds of our friendly conversations.

What we wish to share

Research within higher education contexts tends to be limited to the experiences of undergraduate students (Sverdlik et al., 2018). The limited research on doctoral students' experiences suggests there are many facets of the graduate student experience that are under-researched and/or underappreciated (Graham et al., 2023; Sverdlik et al., 2018; Woolston, 2017). In this special issue, articles draw on the lived experiences of the authors to explore topics of interest through an equity lens as a way of igniting conversations that might support further positive change in this academic space. Our articles will often take on a personal narrative voice and/or be written in the first person as most existing studies lack a comprehensive perspective on doctoral students' lived experiences and do not explore the complex depths of these experiences (Sverdlik et al., 2018). We aim to express our ideas in a clear, accessible, and informed manner such that we can engage academic and non-academic communities simply because with the lack of studies in the field, there may an adverse effect on the future of graduate studies in Canada (Sverdlik et al., 2018; Woolston, 2017), and we hope this accessible issue can address this. Therefore, we write for ourselves and our peers as well as for a range of audiences including incoming PhD applicants, university administrators, and/or faculty members. After publication, we aim to continue the inclusive and accessible conversation through discussions over openly accessible knowledge mobilization platforms such as live webinars, blogs, and podcasts.

This special issue considers the affordances and challenges of the first year of doctoral study through a collection of articles sharing the lived experiences of first-year PhD students during the

latter half of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our cohort represents diverse and complex dynamics from geographical locations to demographics, from various academic backgrounds to intersectional lived experiences. As such we believe the articles in this issue will shed light on a wide range of significant details for further research.

At the same time, we are grateful to those graduate students who have come before us from this Faculty and who published their own lived experiences of various milestone moments of the PhD progression experience (see Winter 2020 and Fall 2021 issues of the *Education Review*; see also Guest et al., 2021).

Hearing from our peers

This collection features the voices and lived experiences of 12 members of the English and French 2021 cohort, as well as one Francophone peer from the 2022 cohort. Even though we are hearing these experiences from one or two authors in this issue, we have heard many similar experiences from others. While not all of our peers had the interest or time to commit to writing a full article for this publication, all who are aware of the project have been remarkably supportive. Our only regret is that currently the English and French cohorts within the faculty seem quite segregated and we have not been able to forge as many connections across these cultural lines and invite additional francophone authors to our special issue as we would have liked. Also, while mental health is discussed in many ways throughout these articles, we unfortunately have not had the opportunity to hear specifically about the experiences of graduate peers with hidden or visible disabilities.

We begin the issue by setting the stage for how our community was formed and sustained to date. **Robert Grant** and **Derya Sahingil** describe their unique experiences of virtual doctoral journey, building close connections within the group which helped sustain their studies and personal well-being. Though the transition to doctoral studies is not always smooth, **Emmanuel Ukwizagira**, **Abigail Abena Owusuwaa Manu**, and **Elie Ndala** with **Hannah Sutherland** each explore how their entry into the doctoral program influenced their expectations and motivations to continue doctoral studies. **Alice Neiley** and **Madelaine McCracken** utilize their space to discuss how they approached conceptualizing and working on two key milestones of the program: the comprehensive exam and thesis proposal process. Following, we hear from mid- to late-career students, **Meg Gerrard** and **Paul McGuire**, and how their intersectional life experiences impact and motivate their studies. **Adolf Diange Eboa** provides some closing reflections on his own experiences and provides advice for incoming students. In closing, **Shaily Gebethner** and **Jenny Stodola** speak to the financial precarity that many doctoral students experience along this journey.

We are grateful to the faculty members who taught the mandatory PhD courses where we all met and built the foundations of our peer support community. They have been extremely supportive of this project, and **Dr. Angus McMurtry** has extended his generosity by providing a closing reflection at the end of the issue. We thank **Dr. Ruth Kane** for her mentorship and support throughout this project, as well as the time given by our peer reviewers and copy editors.

In closing... or opening?

As co-editors, we both worked together every step of the way, complementing each other and learning as we led. The order of our names is no indication of one of us doing more than the other; it is merely an alphabetical organizational detail. And with the full support of our cohort and academic community, we are excited to share a glimpse of the inner minds and experiences of PhD life post-COVID-19 pandemic and expose the contemporary joys and challenges of pursuing the goal of

generating new knowledge for positive societal impact and personal growth and achievement. We hope you join us in continuing this conversation beyond the bounds of the pages of this special issue.

In kindness and for change,

Derya & Jenny

Co-Editors

Derya Sahingil

Derya is a third year international PhD candidate (Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa) from Türkiye. She is a proud woman of colour, a feminist teacher/educator for thirteen years, and a former Fulbright scholar. Her research, supervised by Dr. Rebecca Lloyd, focuses on helping women not only survive but also thrive through difficult circumstances through a phenomenological study of oppressive silence and moving sensations of writing as a form of voice and being.

Jenny Stodola

Jenny Stodola, third year PhD candidate (Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa) and second-generation Canadian of Czech descent, is the first in her family to pursue a doctorate degree. Previously studying biochemistry, virology, and immunology she professionally leverages her interests in health sciences education as an instructional designer/educational developer. Supervised by Professors E.Y. Koné and D. Archibald, her PhD in reconciliation research intends to explore how settler family physicians and trainees can develop better relationships with their Indigenous patients.

Managing the inescapable: Building a virtual community to combat issues of isolation through distance learning

Rob Grant & Derya Sahingil

Rob Grant is a third year PhD candidate at the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa. His research explores the experiences of queer French as a second language (FSL) teachers in Ontario and how their identities impact, alter, and shape their teaching. Rob is also interested in examining avenues to make FSL more inclusive for all learners, as well as creating inclusive and queer-friendly language teaching materials. Rob is currently a teacher within the Toronto District School Board (TDSB).

Derya is a third year international PhD candidate (Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa) from Türkiye. She is a proud woman of colour, a feminist teacher/educator for thirteen years, and a former Fulbright scholar. Her research, supervised by Dr. Rebecca Lloyd, focuses on helping women not only survive but also thrive through difficult circumstances through a phenomenological study of oppressive silence and moving sensations of writing as a form of voice and being.

Abstract

This graduate student narrative traces the experiences of two junior scholars, Rob and Derya, as they live through virtual doctoral studies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than focusing on inherently adverse aspects of their studies, this recounting sheds light on how community and collaboration are forms of sustainment within their doctoral degrees. More specifically, the findings of their narratives reveal that developing a community vis-à-vis: instant messaging groups, creating writing groups, sharing experiences, and being authentic with themselves and everyone around them which helps to create a more fulfilling, caring, and sustaining experience when undertaking doctoral studies in a virtual platform. These narrative accounts of the first two years of their studies are instrumental in holistically understanding the virtual graduate student experience and aim to provide direction for students who seek more support within their virtual programs.

Introduction

As authors (i.e., Rob and Derya), we ruminated on our experiences of virtual graduate school in the PhD Education program at the University of Ottawa thus far. Through our conversation, we continuously circled around the idea that our (new) friendships have been a source of success for us in the PhD program. It has been through consistent dialogue, group writing and feedback sessions, and coffee breaks, that we have been able to juggle and jump through the many hurdles of the program. It is noteworthy to point out that we were both not explicitly interested in pursuing online doctoral studies. Yet, emergency remote teaching relegated us both to our homes, and eventually extended into us completing all our course work online. Now, we are both on track to completing most of our degree online. Currently, the data on the experiences of online PhD programs and their students' experiences is limited, though growing (Berry, 2017; Lambrev & Cruz, 2021). However, examining such experiences is crucial to not only virtual programs, but specifically to virtual PhD programs. Indeed, understanding the health of online learning and how it operates, impacts students, and its perceived effectiveness, depends to some extent on the narrative accounts of students' experiences to gain insight into the strengths and limitations of them. Some of the literature to date has focused on the drawbacks of navigating higher education online and specifically during the pandemic, even within our own university (see Guest et al., 2021; Han et al., 2021). The impetus of our graduate student narratives instead aims to shed light on positive aspects of unintentional virtual graduate school, and specifically, the implications of building community as a form of sustainment in such a rigorous program. Through individual narratives, we trace our journeys as virtual PhD students and discuss how our communities have been paramount to our success to date. Oceans apart, we reveal how community among and between colleagues should be the framework around which graduate programs should be anchored.

Context

Thinking back to the beginning of September 2021, as the COVID-19 pandemic was in full swing, it seemed like we were entering a precarious and liminal space to begin our doctoral studies in education. We knew how difficult and demanding the program was going to be, and yet, we also were seeing now, more than ever, the need to prioritize our mental health and wellbeing. The two ideas (e.g., graduate school and mental health) seemed to be at odds with each other. Yet, we still embarked on the decision to apply in late 2020 and early 2021 – and luckily – be accepted into graduate school. Given the ongoing pandemic, we began our studies in a completely virtual manner; on-campus instruction was not permitted, and emergency online teaching policies were put in place.

The authors first met during one of their first mandatory courses: *Epistemologies of Educational Research*. The first word of the title sent us both into a rush of cognitive turmoil and excitement exploring deeply the philosophies of knowledge-building; however, it was through this course that we tethered ourselves together and began to bond over the complexity of theories that ricochet throughout the academic disciplines of education. Through online discussions, virtual breakout rooms, co-presenting assignments, editing and reviewing each other's assessments, and talking about life, hopes, aspirations, and challenges we were drawn closer together and were able to build a community to sustain us through our PhD programs to today. The context of our graduate studies, then, is viewed through our own online spaces, but it is also situated in the overlapping and coming together of our isolated spaces to create humanizing relationships online.

Rob's journey – From isolated to embraced: Using community as a form of sustainment for distance graduate education

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I applied for a PhD in Education at the University of Ottawa. I was interested in research from the experience I had in my master's program and had a few questions in mind that I wanted to explore in detail. I was more than eager to start the program, and even though I knew the platform had to be online due to COVID-19, I was nervous that I would not receive the same level of support. There are so many obstacles (i.e., navigating online learning spaces, finding important information about registration, fees, courses, etc..), paired with the entirety of the hidden curriculum of grad school (Calarco, 2020) that I wasn't sure I could face in isolation. I am also a person who thrives while working collaboratively, talking through problems, and listening and learning from others, which in turn, conjured even more feelings of anxiety toward learning online. As the program's start date drew closer, I began to feel anxious about how I was going to navigate such a new and complex world – virtually.

When I started the program, everything was going seemingly well. Attending classes was convenient from my downtown Toronto apartment, hundreds of kilometers from the University of Ottawa campus. I loved the option of rolling out of bed, opening my computer, and clicking a Zoom link to be transported to a new world of knowledge sharing, collaboration, and growth. It was a nice change from teaching grade 8 the previous two years. However, the program quickly became daunting – and isolating – as assignment deadlines approached, reading piles grew in weight and thickness, and as my endless self-doubt continued to scream at me to give up. I had no friends pursuing graduate school at the time within my inner circle in Toronto, which contributed to my sense of loneliness. One of my expectations of the PhD program was having conversations and debates about what

we were reading, how it applied to our lives, experiences, and research, and how we planned on using it to create and transform our own questions and ideas. Unfortunately, this was severely lacking for me.

It was not long after that I began to work virtually with two others (Alice and Derya) – mostly because of our overlapping research interests. It was through consistent communication with them that I realized my loneliness was because of a lack of communication with people who were also undergoing their doctoral studies. Indeed, I was craving conversation and dialogue among people who shared a similar end goal -- obtaining our doctoral degrees. Our conversations and discussions – once completely anchored around PhD work – were evolving into friendship and conversations broadened to be about our lives, experiences, and aspirations. Alice, Derya, and I met weekly online through Zoom, created a group conversation via WhatsApp, and were in regular communication. It is important to note, however, that this constant communication was not overwhelming or concerning. Instead, it helped ground me. Our conversations alleviated anxiety about upcoming deadlines, how to cite using APA 7th edition, and what ontology, axiology, and of course, epistemology, even were. Before finding my home among my peers, I felt as though I needed to have all of the answers to these questions, and if I didn't, then I likely wasn't a good fit for grad school. In a hopeful turn, this small bit of community with Derya and Alice continued to sustain me throughout my course work and comprehensive examinations, and now into the thesis proposal stage of my doctoral work. Although I didn't know it at the time, we were engaging in community building that would soon become instrumental for us (Lambrev & Cruz, 2021).

I think the success of our community building stemmed from a shared vision: we were all alone, and we needed (albeit, wanted!) each

other. As many people say, the PhD journey takes a village. Alice and Derya remained constants in my life and became my 'village'. Our shared vision for our community was rooted in ongoing support and encouragement, which is well developed throughout Derya's narrative later in this piece. A normal feeling for any graduate student – that of imposter syndrome (Cope-Watson & Betts, 2010; Nori et al., 2020) – was something we all felt. However, these feelings were intensified because of our ongoing isolation. That is, we didn't always know how to move away from these feelings. Through dialogue, conversations around our work, and our potential, we began to feel more adequate and accepted as junior scholars and as PhD students who were finding their paths along our doctoral journey.

While our community (e.g., Alice, Derya, and myself) has been pivotal to our success so far, it is important to note that our community also extended beyond the three of us. Indeed, we built community within our cohort at the Faculty of Education. The twenty-some of us in the English-speaking 2021 incoming cohort took the same three mandatory courses with the same professors, had the same time blocks, and had ample time to connect and build relationships. Key to these relationships was the genuine sincerity that everyone displayed and offered. Indeed, this community moved beyond the core courses of the program, with connections strengthened on an individual basis. The cohort also was sustaining across the subsequent phases of the degree through a cohort-level WhatsApp group chat, sharing advice, tips, resources and mentorship.[1] Salient moments within the WhatsApp group - for me - occurred when people were asking for feedback. Members of the group were often keen to help, edit, and revise others' work in hopes of strengthening the overall quality. I learned a great deal about writing strategies

and the editing process thanks to their ongoing and constant support. Such feedback was helpful for everyone and we were all on the same page, again with a shared vision and goal of completing the degree. Interestingly, it felt like we were all contributing to changing the face of education (and doctoral programs in particular) because of the online delivery. That is, as online PhD students, we were contributing to shaping how distanced doctoral degrees could run, how professors could adapt and shape their course content to meet our growing needs, and how we wanted to learn.

Since the goal of this article was to highlight the advantages of our online community, I wish to end with four concrete strategies for other PhD students to build – and maintain – such a graduate studies support community based on my own experiences and perceptions:

i) make an effort to connect and talk with everyone; learn about them, their interests (both research and otherwise), and try to build authentic connections;

ii) surround yourself with peers who may have similar - and also dissimilar! - research interests so that you can learn and grow from them, while also challenging any assumptions or concrete perspectives that you may have in your field. This will be particularly helpful when looking for support on readings, receiving and giving feedback on articles or papers, and in critically evaluating and analyzing your position within the field.

iii) engage in co-constructed, and perhaps frequent, dialogue; This is not to say that there needs to be constant communication among the cohort, but that if time is carved out of a schedule to meet, talk, discuss, and critically engage in conversation, then the routine may become an academic habit and contribute to greater learning and discussion. This is also

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[1] For example, a typical conversation through our WhatsApp group consisted of one us or one of our peers reaching out over a question or concern. Some people, for instance, were curious about how to properly cite APA7th edition for various books and journals. Colleagues responded timely and efficiently by providing links to resources, as well as examples as how to write the citation properly.

fruitful when giving critical feedback to one another.

Finally, iv) trust the process of the PhD program and your colleagues within the program. It is undeniable how you will grow while reading and speaking with them – perhaps even more so than through lectures or whole-class discussions. In fact, during a PhD degree, one spends more time on independent work outside of the classroom than in it, so maintaining these physically distant, but virtually close, connections become even more important to sustaining a community.

Ultimately, these tools and strategies are not a 'one size fits all', but serve as a stepping stone for other graduate students and various stakeholders alike in understanding the student experience for online PhD education.

Derya's Journey – From isolated to embraced: Virtual community as a pillar of encouragement, empowerment, and well-being

It was 30 minutes past midnight in Türkiye and I attended my first PhD course in Ottawa, Canada, through a computer screen. As I logged in, I wondered how it would be possible to handle the time difference on top of the graduate school workload, as well as my full-time solo parenting responsibilities during the day. It was not long before my toddler son woke up and came looking for me to soothe him back to sleep. I could not leave him alone and I also could not leave my very first class. So, I turned my camera off, held him on my lap for the duration of the class – three hours – hoping he would fall asleep. He did not, and we shared yet another "first" together that night: my son and I attended my first PhD course together and I could not feel my arms for a while.

I turned my camera off as I was not sure how it would "appear" to my peers and professor to have a student sit in the very first class with a child attached to her. Even though COVID-19 prepared many of us to be accommodating to personal necessities more than ever and be as flexible as possible, that was not how I imagined my first class to be. I enrolled in the in-person PhD program without even imagining the possibility of it turning online for the entire year. I also was under a lot of stress due to personal issues. I would go to bed at around 4 am (5 am when the fall time changes in Ottawa) and wake up three hours later as my son is an early riser. He could not go to kindergarten for the first year of my PhD due to COVID-19 precautions in Türkiye. That meant that I took care of him full time during the day while getting assignments and projects done.

In the midst of all the unknown dynamics of my personal situation, I found the established boundaries of the two classes I was taking quite relieving. With the way the courses were designed, I knew what was expected of me to do in twelve-week semesters. At least, with my PhD, I had (and still have) a solid ground with a mostly controllable schedule. As opposed to the unknown dynamics of life, my PhD provided a fairly stable horizon with clear deadlines and a one-step-at-a-time attitude from the instructors. Besides, I was amongst intelligent and caring people from around the world who shared a similar academic experience, even though it was in a virtual space. Eventually, attending the online classes made me feel like a part of that community; for a change, I was not isolated anymore, I was not alone in this virtual space of a new academic experience. I felt encouraged, empowered, and emotionally supported by my cohort and by the instructors throughout the first year of the program. And eventually, I stopped questioning my decision to start a PhD at this time of my life. I felt (and still feel) that I could not have chosen a better time!

Figure 1

Walking into the abyss where darkness resists (Derya Sahingil)

Walking into the abyss
where darkness resists
the light we reminisce.
And yet, still we go
Pacing, not racing though,
Over the hills, through the plateau
Leading with the inner glow.
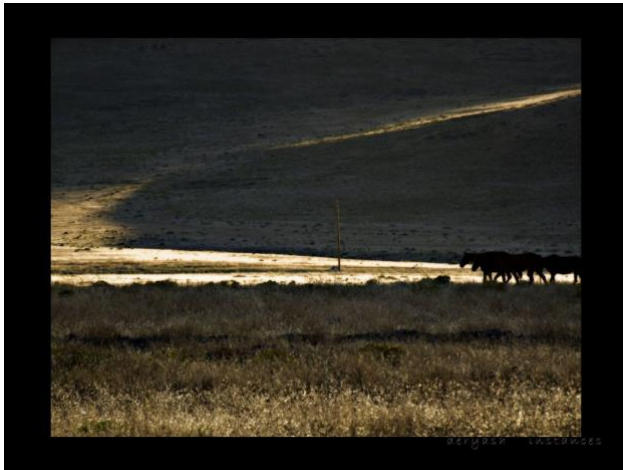
Virtual community as a pillar of encouragement

Berry (2017) describes community as "a space of connection, closeness and interactivity" (p. 1). This understanding of community is what we also think of while writing this paper with *Author 1*. The connection through which we felt close to one another turned our group into something more than a cohort; we built a community amongst each other. For Alice, Rob, and I, it was a quick in-course connection which we carried out of academic bounds and enjoyed many times over virtual coffee chats. We created a chat group on WhatsApp and vented about life, academics, and everything in between.

One factor that contributed to this connection and the building of community amongst our small group and our cohort is the synchronicity of all the classes we took the first year together. Seeing each other weekly in the compulsory courses for the first year of PhD made us connect through classes, which eventually led to us meeting virtually in informal settings to just chat and get to know one another. Synchronous classes and their contributions to the feeling of belonging and a sense of community are supported by the literature as well (Abdelmalak, 2015; Clark et al., 2015; Heilporn et al., 2021; Lambrev & Cruz, 2021; McDaniels et al., 2016). Asynchronous learning environments, not surprisingly, contribute to feelings of isolation (Skelcher et al., 2020). Thanks to the synchronous nature of the courses in our PhD program, even though we could not share the same classroom face-to-face with each other, we could still enjoy the same virtual space with our little faces in windows right next to one another. I remember before one of our co-presentations with cohort peers, Shaily and Jenny, we decided to show up with some make-up and wear something more formal than our casual sweatshirts. The platform gave us the opportunity to socialize and normalize our academic experiences. If it were not for the synchronous nature of the classes, the experience of the first year of PhD would have been quite challenging for me. I owe a great deal of my motivation to the encouragement I receive(d) from my cohort peers, who are now more than the words 'cohort peers' would signify.

Virtual community as a pillar of well-being

As Lambrev and Cruz (2021) contend, community-building through online education does not only help improve our mood and make us feel good, but also allows us to keep a positive psychological attitude throughout the process of maintaining well-being. And for that, I have a few suggestions.

1. Be open to vulnerability.

As relational beings, we need connection. During online education, as the studies show (Akyol et al., 2009; Berry, 2017, 2019; Buss & Wolf, 2021; Clark et al., 2015; Dong & Ishige, 2022; Guest et al., 2021; Lambrev & Cruz, 2021), emotional connection has a huge impact

on the quality of learning. Yet, still, emotions have always been the outcast of academic writing (Ahmed, 2015; Zembylas, 2008). That is one perspective we aim to change, one person at a time. As Zembylas (2008) contends, emotions are a factor of motivation or demotivation, especially in online learning. The way our cohort communicated through the emotional landscape of pandemic-framed graduate studies, online learning, life happenings, crisis moments, meltdowns, etc. made it possible for us to form a community amongst each other. I believe what made our community such a special one was the willingness to be vulnerable with each other. I recall on our first day of classes in the second term of our studies, one of our professors introduced himself quite openly, and without any hesitation shared the difficulties he had faced through his own academic journey. He invited us to be real and authentic in our introductions, as well. Following his example, many of us opened up and shared the struggles we have been through, personally, professionally, and academically. The conversations extended to the Zoom breakout rooms that day, where we were assigned to discuss a course topic in smaller groups. We kept sharing with one another and eventually the reality of those conversations brought us closer. Being vulnerable brings out genuine conversations and enables strong relationships.

2. Turning the camera on is caring.

As a high school ESL teacher for twelve years before starting my PhD and having experienced online education through the COVID-19 lockdown, I had firsthand experience with the impact of trying to have healthy conversations with black squares on my screen. I have always been very close to my students. Not being able to be in physical proximity with them was quite challenging. Especially as a language teacher, I feel it is significant to make eye contact and to communicate via gestures and body language.

Therefore, as a student, I always turned my camera on during the synchronous courses, except for some occasions where my son woke up and wanted to sleep on my lap (and eventually I turned off the camera not because I was worried about how it would "look" with my son in the virtual classroom, but because I wanted to respect my son's privacy). I believe this was another important factor that made us all feel so connected, as all of us mostly kept our cameras on during the courses. That contributed to getting to know one another, including family members, kids, and pets who occasionally appeared on the screen. That created a warmth and a kind of normalcy, as though we were in the same space somehow. Of course it does not even compare being in the same classroom with one another, but it helped us build close connections within our cohort.

3. It is not just you! Share it with your peers.

Especially within a PhD program, it is difficult to say openly that you do not understand something. However, please do! You will see that you are not the only one having that issue. I recall the first article our epistemology professor assigned us to read. It was about epistemology and ontology and I read it twice. It still did not make any sense. Coming back to academia after twelve years, this was quite disheartening. Thanks to a friend expressing this sentiment out loud to the professor in the next class, I felt relieved to know I was not the only one, and shared with everyone how I also found it very difficult to understand. This is only one example of the situations where you may feel like you are the only one experiencing a certain difficulty, feeling, or phase. However, more often than not, you are not alone. Just be honest and share.

Conclusion

Through narrative and autobiographical accounts of our own experiences detailing both the successes and challenges of the PhD program, we sought to shed light on the criticality of building a community among colleagues in virtual doctoral programs. As we discussed, online graduate school can be isolating and lonely. However, establishing and sustaining a community of people driven by the same end goal can provide emotional support, opportunities for collaboration, and a sense of shared purpose. This can be accomplished even if individuals come to the program with diverse life experiences prior to the PhD, and regardless of how they wish to leverage their degree for their career. Through consistent communication, group writing and feedback sessions, and friendly conversations, students can forge relationships that will sustain them throughout the programs' many 'bumps in the road'. These communities can extend beyond the confines of the virtual classroom and (hopefully) result in lifelong friendships. Our experiences suggest that community building should be integrated with various other aspects of online graduate programs and that it requires both student and faculty effort and dedication.

The pursuit of a PhD is an overwhelming journey. It can be quite draining, especially with impostor syndrome and its effects on novice scholars. Going through a PhD during the additional stress of a worldwide pandemic and amid all kinds of uncertainty could have been even worse if it were not for the bonds we created within our cohort. We supported, encouraged, enlightened, and embraced one another through each step. Through WhatsApp groups, we shared our experiences on writing course papers, the comprehensive exam process, submitting official documents, thesis proposal steps and many other instances where we felt lost or confused. The open-hearted and open-minded dialogues we have within our cohort also made this issue a fun,

collaborative project for all of us. Our friends, who could not be a part of this issue, supported and motivated us during this process. So, to honour this, both Rob and I wanted to reflect the friendly dialogic tone of our conversations within this article to make it read like we are conversing *with* people instead of writing *at* them. And it would be amazing to keep the conversation moving forward. After all, education is all about the relational connections we make throughout the journey regardless of the level of education, time-zone, or geographical location, regardless of the socio-economic background of the people. So, let's converse!

Perceived opportunities and challenges for an international student during the covid-19 pandemic: A self-study

Emmanuel Ukwizagira

Emmanuel Ukwizagira is currently pursuing his doctorate in the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa. His research interests encompass school leadership and administration. Building on the foundation of his master's thesis that examined the role of secondary school principals in Rwanda, Emmanuel is currently working on the issues of maladministration in schooling settings. With a diverse professional background spanning teaching, tutoring, and a decade of administrative service in local government in Rwanda, Emmanuel is a dedicated advocate for advancing education.

Abstract

The global outbreak of COVID-19 precipitated shifts in how universities worldwide functioned, compelling an abrupt transition from on-campus to virtual learning. As an international graduate student, I retrospectively examine how the pandemic has reshaped my academic journey. My focus centers on the challenges and opportunities that defined my first year of doctoral studies in Education at the University of Ottawa, commencing in September 2021 amidst ongoing emergency online teaching measures. I identify the negative experiences including the effect on mental health, diminished motivation and concentration, reduced peer interactions and networking, and financial effect. Simultaneously, I highlight positive aspects, such as the acceleration of digital transformation, fostering autonomy, altering perspectives on online education, and enhancing awareness of human interconnectivity. Additionally, I advocate for a hybrid approach to learning in the after-pandemic tertiary education, positing that on-campus and virtual learning should harmoniously coexist as components of student attendance. This approach would provide students with the flexibility to choose between synchronous and asynchronous formats, ultimately enriching their educational experience.

Keywords: *COVID-19, online learning, lived experiences, higher education, student*

Introduction

The emergence of COVID-19 and the subsequent pandemic imposed abrupt and unprecedented changes in how universities operate around the world (Cranfield et al., 2021). Typically for higher education, initial shifts occurred at the time of lockdown and travel restrictions in March 2020, when universities physically closed their premises and asked most employees and students to work/study from home in an effort to halt the spread of the virus. Although a few signs of the pandemic still linger four years later, university staff and students have lived personal experiences worth sharing and potentially informing the future of higher education management. As an international student at the graduate level, I look back at my personal records of events and experiences to document how the pandemic has shaped my academic routines. Specifically, I focus on the challenges and opportunities that marked my student life in the first year of doctoral studies in Education at the University of Ottawa in Canada, which I began in September 2021 while emergency online teaching measures remained in place. As I reflect on such experiences, I acknowledge that it is difficult to claim this narrative is entirely my monopoly because the pandemic has established some shareable norms around virtual campus students.

COVID-19 and Higher Education

From traditional campus routines to abrupt closures of physical university spaces and online migration, university students and staff embarked on a new direction in their academic routines due to COVID-19. In the beginning, all campus events were postponed to later dates, if not cancelled (Sahu, 2020), to limit the spread of the virus among university community members. Staff and students had to learn to accommodate those changes immediately amidst uncertainty of what ensuing days held as far as the resumption of academic activities and events was concerned. Among measures taken to resume academics, was the removal of on-campus teaching and learning to minimize social contact. Sahu (2020) describes this change as a great reset that led to the exponential rise in digital pedagogy implementation, among other things. That is, a rapid and unprecedented switch to the online mode of teaching and learning (Escalon et al., 2020; Torun & Torun, 2020).

Studies conducted in different contexts have associated this adaptation to the core of teaching and learning approaches which, in parallel, has resulted in various and differing concerns among students. For example, Baloran's (2020) study of perceptions and attitudes of law students from two private universities in the Philippines noted uncertainty, anxiety, and stress in relation to pivoting to online learning. In a more specific study of how higher learning institutions responded to learning during the pandemic in Portugal, Sin et al. (2023) found worries related to food security and financial resources, as well as decreases in enrollment and social contact among international students enrolled. Similarly in Canada, Conrad et al.'s (2022) study, focusing on undergraduate students' experiences with the online learning environment at a major university during the pandemic, revealed dissatisfaction associated with information overload, perceived technical skill demands, lack of social interactions, and class formats. Moreover, Appleby et al.'s (2022) investigation into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the experiences and mental well-being of university students highlighted that among all students surveyed at Queen's University in Ontario, 32% encountered difficulties adapting to new learning methodologies, 56% noted feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and restlessness due to social isolation, while 11% expressed financial concerns stemming from reduced income coupled with sustained expenses.

Beyond these challenges, some students' academic routines have conversely recorded positive experiences. For instance, Abbasi et al.'s (2020) study of undergraduate students' perceptions in Pakistan notes that 23% of 800 respondents preferred online over traditional learning for the future of their formal education. Other research findings have shown that students enjoyed the flexibility and efficiency that characterized digital teaching and learning during the pandemic. In a study conducted among 200 undergraduate students from different universities in Norway, Gonzalez et al. (2022) noted that students were satisfied with online teaching and learning because they could access digital content any time they wanted to, given they had more control over access. Further, contrary to usual physical attendance, digital learning meant less travel time to and from the campus, culminating in efficient use of time.

While existing literature has clearly documented university students' experiences in terms of challenges and opportunities with online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, it predominantly focused on undergraduate students. Further, a critical gap remains in how to reconcile such differing students' experiences regarding the future of tertiary education. Therefore, reflecting on my own experiences as a graduate student during the pandemic, I draw on existing research findings while also offering insights on potential strategies to accommodate students' experiences into academic routines.

Trends in students' experiences and my own lived experience

Lack of motivation and concentration

As the implementation of new teaching and learning approaches was underway, students had different experiences adapting fundamental changes to routines they used to live before the pandemic. For instance, universities tried to adapt their teaching approaches by essentially switching to fully remote and online lectures, also termed emergency online teaching. One area that was affected by this shift was students' motivation and concentration in academic activities. In a qualitative study of how online learning affected university students in one Indonesian Polytechnic, Gustiani (2020) observed that during the pandemic, while some students were intrinsically eager to continue studies online, others were not motivated due to external factors such as learning environment, lack of time and other resources. In my case, the nature of online teaching was what seemed to decrease my motivation. In reading over a personal diary from the time, I noted:

> *I started with the coursework, which was entirely virtual, but asynchronous or synchronous. During the first week of this coursework portion, I felt bored with asynchronous classes which consisted of offline videos/audios and texts. While I was satisfied with the quality of the substance in the offline video/audio content, to me it was more like watching a movie or listening to radio channels, stuff I have not naturally been a fan of... To be honest, I personally didn't have that sense of being a true student in the face of asynchronous classes in the first place. (Ukwizagira, Personal Journal, 2021)*

Unlike the asynchronous lessons, synchronous sessions brought inspiration to my perceptions as a student. While the lack of in-person interactions and communication between professors and among students was a reality we had to live due to the pandemic, in the synchronous online format, I had the possibility of attending classes in real-time. However, other external factors can demotivate students. What was more challenging with my synchronous schedules was the different time zones of my geographical location and the university. Such a disparity can negatively affect students' ability to attend synchronous classes, sometimes leading to challenges in actively participating in lectures and completing high-quality assignments. This was my case: classes

started at 11:30 am local time at the university, which was in the evening where I was living before travelling to Canada (which had been prevented by COVID-19-related restrictions). I had personally noted that:

> I missed two synchronous classes in my first two weeks of fall term 2021. The schedule was not in my favour in terms of time because it started in evenings when I had to attend to other responsibilities as a father. And such evening schedules started just after a full-time working day. But after I relocated in proximity of the university, I at least liked synchronous lessons which nearly looked like my pre-pandemic classes during my Master's degree. (Ukwizagira, Personal Journal, 2021)

Figure 1

Portrait of a happy man taking a break from work to enjoy reading a book (Emmanuel Ikwuegbu)

Schedules starting in the evening overlapped with the time I had to attend to other life responsibilities, and they normally ended at the time I had to rest and plan the following day's schedule. In the context of local time, I was working full time from 7:00 am to 5:00 pm. After office hours, for my daily routines as a father, I needed at least two hours to attend to other responsibilities. Thus, for me, the possibility of regularly attending a synchronous class scheduled on weekdays was not guaranteed before I relocated to Canada. To wit, online lecturing intrinsically disrupted my

attendance and willingness as a student and reinforced the feeling of uncertainty about whether that context of learning was going to be a success for me. However, after relocation, I gradually recovered hope with my academic habits such that I was able to attend synchronous lectures.

Lack of contact with peers and reduced networking

In the context where every single academic activity migrated to the web, in-person social contacts among students became rare. Gavrilață et al. (2022) conducted a survey among undergraduate and graduate students in Romania and noted that participants had experienced marked lack of in-person social contact. Clearly, students could not meet physically to attend academically scheduled activities/events, to discuss academic assignments, or for any other events they could organize at their convenience due to lockdown measures. Therefore, with the web format of classes where different platforms (for example: Zoom, Webex, Google Meet, etc.) were used to agree on schedules, prepare and create class presentations, virtual spaces took over from in-person contacts among students. Such a context maintained a physical disconnect between students by mostly keeping them in online spaces. I lived such an experience; I reflected:

> In my first year of [the] doctoral program, I attended all my courses online. Whether for individual or group activities, all we could [do] was to prepare and submit everything online. I didn't have an opportunity to physically meet other students in person. I spent most of the time in my room; I used to [just] be seated in front of my computer reading or writing. I missed that environment where you can see other students on the campus or in your classroom. (Ukwizagira, Personal Journal, 2021)

EEffect on students' mental health and wellbeing

Gavriluță et al. (2022) remind us that physical separation may lead to loneliness and other negative emotions such as anger and sadness. Equally importantly, isolation periods have the potential to elicit, as Pancani et al. (2021) note, "intense feelings of fear and threat for human survival, boosting the development of psychological issues" (p. 6). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the deluge of data regarding daily infections and deaths, which almost seemed never-ending, could be terrifying for students. During the isolation period,

> *I was always skeptical about going to public places because I wasn't always sure it was safe to go and I wanted to avoid contracting the virus. I felt I was reduced to reading journal articles, writing assignments, or preparing for presentations. Mostly, once in my study space, questions like "when will physical classes resume?" kept popping up in my thoughts. (Ukwizagira, Personal Journal, 2021)*

Despite such times, I found coping strategies helpful to keep going as I tried to maintain my mental health and improve my mood. I mainly used this time to get enough sleep. I have equally enjoyed indoor physical exercise, and sometimes engaged in entertainment such as watching football (soccer, in North America) matches.

Financial effects

The pandemic triggered abrupt and generalized changes in countrywide economies mostly due to closures of activities. Specifically, when speaking of difficulties related to international students in Canada, Firang and Mensah (2022) cite rising rates of unemployment amidst the pandemic. That is, a substantial amount of the types of jobs that some of the international students used to do to meet some of their financial needs closed during lockdown. At the time:

> *I believed it was going to be easy to get some part time jobs to generate*

> *additional income to support my budget as an international student. However, I submitted my resume to different employers, but I never got hired until I decided to give up and wait for the ease of restrictions. I then reviewed my budget and tried alternative sources of income. (Ukwizagira, Personal Journal, 2021)*

Increased awareness of human interconnectivity

The COVID-19 pandemic has taught me many lessons in relation to humanity, especially as an international student and as a foreigner trying to cope within a new country context. It demonstrated the need for timely and accurate information in responding to global issues. It has also revealed the need to reimagine what role I, as a 'social being' can play at the personal level to halt or intensify the crisis around our social space.

> *I consciously decided to refrain from going to campus to meet classmates physically as I believed I needed to protect my life and the life of my neighbor in the physical space. I then prioritized and understood the essence of virtual academic schedules with professors and friends. (Ukwizagira, Personal Journal, 2021)*

Clearly, this triggered a sense of self-conscious understanding of what and why I had to forfeit as I aimed to play a role toward a collective solution against the spread of COVID-19. As a student specifically, rather than dropping out from studies until the return of pre-pandemic classes, I consciously forged ways to live on this virtual campus and continued my academic activities.

Furthermore, the virtual campus context has also highlighted that cooperation between people is essential in tackling the pandemic and perhaps in efforts to get back to pre-pandemic campus mode. However, what remained unanswered to me is whether:

I need a threat of global magnitude to be reminded of human interdependence. Or whether more crises would bring more understanding and collaboration between and among human beings. (Ukwizagira, Personal Journal, 2021)

Perhaps, there is a need to carefully consider the costs of the crises and what it would take us (humanity) when I/we act as conscious members of the community whose actions/behaviours directly or indirectly impact other members of the community.

Digital transformation

The pandemic has forced academic routines to embrace digital technologies. Specifically, teaching and learning were conducted using online platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet. This new approach was an opportunity for university students such as me, who had not had much experience with online learning, to develop new skills as they take advantage of virtual learning. Indeed, students and professors had the opportunity to use basic digital skills or learn new ones in order to cope with the pandemic-imposed educational context. For example, besides occasionally using my computer for basic routines of processing documents such as writing a term paper or downloading/attaching some academic material from/to my email in pre-pandemic learning experiences, I had to perform these routines on a daily basis either to attend synchronous lectures or complete academic tasks. That is, as a student during the pandemic, I depended on my digital devices to access information regarding coursework content or any other academic communication. Through consistent engagement, I cultivated a substantial degree of familiarity with my digital devices. Consequently, my smartphone and computer became indispensable instruments integral to my academic pursuits amid the prevailing pandemic circumstances.

One of the things that really impacted my computer literacy [were] the recurrent weekly assignments in the [PhD-level] course, Contemporary Issues in Educational Research, *and others, where I needed to prepare and submit a weekly essay. Besides reading other students' responses and commenting on their responses, I regularly read, typed, wrote, and learnt from fellow students' digital skills. I felt myself immersed in digital habits of preparing and sharing your work. And what really changed with me is, I feel relaxed [when working online] and I now take digital means as indispensable source in my student life. (Ukwizagira, Personal Journal, 2021)*

Indeed, the first year of my doctoral program marked my first experience with a virtual campus as I normally attended physical classes during my master's and undergraduate programs. During previous academic routines, my laptop was occasionally important when I had to type or print academic assignments, compose or read emails, or search for online sources; however, this was not on daily basis. To wit, with the online learning format, digital technologies dominated my student routines on a regular basis to the point I developed familiarity with my computer as I regularly kept using the University of Ottawa virtual learning space (Brightspace).

Increased autonomy

Asynchronous schedules allowed students to enjoy some degree of control over learning activities in terms of time and pace. As a small example, a student had the opportunity to play audiovisual content (such as recorded lectures or seminar sessions) as many times as they wanted. More specifically in my view, studying at home has provided students with a sense of control over their work where they have been able to establish a daily routine including specific times for waking up, exercising, eating, studying, and resting. Explicitly speaking, studying at home provided me with an opportunity to create a dedicated workspace, utilize technology, stay connected with peers

and professors, manage my time effectively, and to take care of my mental health. Hence, I have been able to enjoy my studies despite serious challenges posed by the pandemic. Indeed,

> I could concentrate on reading or writing overnight and go to bed during the day. I used to feel more energetic between evening and midnight hours rather than day hours. I could even switch to leisure any time of the day when I felt tired or that I need to change activities. (Ukwizagira, Personal Journal, 2021)

In short, this degree of self-governing during online learning during the pandemic has helped me, among other factors, to complete different academic tasks and keep going despite the challenges.

Effect on perceptions towards online education

Although online teaching and learning processes in higher education have been often perceived as a viable alternative to physical places of teaching and learning (Joy & Garcia, 2000), some scholars such as Adams and DeFleur (2006) claim that online education can be underestimated in face of traditional education. For example, casting doubts over quality, Chau (2010) argues that online teaching and learning reduce education to a mere commodity, students to consumers rather than learners, and faculty to entrepreneurs. Besides concerns over quality of delivery, Adams and DeFleur's (2006) survey findings on employers' perceptions toward credentials earned online raise concerns over its acceptability in the eyes of employers. This survey conducted in the USA among employers across a variety of fields, including education, noted that employers preferred applicants who were trained through traditional contexts (on campus) rather than those who received online education. In fact, I personally shared these scholars' (Chau, as well as Adams and DeFleur's) views before the online mode of attendance became a norm in

my student life. As I became immersed in the virtual campus,

> … I no longer have prejudice against the profile of online graduates. I believe that what matters in terms of knowledge and skill acquisition is successfully completing my student activities. All I needed was to remain organized and focused on my stuff. I committed to equally concentrating on lectures (synchronous and asynchronous), completing academic tasks withing deadlines, printing voluminous readings, and contacting professors as soon I need clarification on a point. (Ukwizagira, Personal Journal, 2021)

Similar to previous findings in the literature, which emphasized that ease and comfort characterized the acceptance of changes introduced in education (Bisht et al., 2020), I perceive a shift in the understanding of online learning overtime. This change in perception has primarily resulted from my personal experience as an online student, particularly in response to the pandemic outbreak and the transition to a virtual learning environment.

Perhaps my change of perception developed alongside the positive experiences that gradually transformed the understanding that I previously held against online learning. That change took shape in the context where only online learning was possible. Equally importantly, this only possibility of student attendance matched with my predisposition to attend classes whatever the learning mode was. In explicit terms, despite an unfamiliar mode of learning being the only option, self-determination coupled with course offerings in a variation of online learning modes, that is asynchronous and synchronous, smoothly facilitated this transformation of perception.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present reflection both from the emerging literature and self-study of lived experience highlighted how the abrupt shift from

traditional to online modes of teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has affected students' academic routines. I have argued that some aspects of students' off-campus learning life were accommodated with ease while others were not. Specifically, on the one hand, autonomy, improvement of digital skills, improved awareness and perception change toward online learning, and potential efficiency in the usage of time are positive legacies noted from my student-researcher's lived experience during the pandemic. However, other challenges such as lack of in-person social interaction and potential threats to students' mental health and well-being are concerns perceived from my position in relation to my experience of attending all or most of my academic activities virtually. Perhaps, there is a need to address or alleviate these concerns as well as maintain the positive legacies associated with virtual campus activities.

Hence the willing future of higher education can turn these students' negative experiences into optimistic ones by paying more attention to individual students' preference of which online approach to follow in relation to synchronous and asynchronous lectures. Specifically based on my experience entering graduate studies mid-pandemic while emergency online teaching was in place, synchronous lectures are more beneficial than asynchronous ones. Synchronous lectures are preferable because they can be attended, allowing students to interact live with professors and among each other, as well as be recorded for offline use later. Moreover, with an eye towards efforts seeking to address issues of limited social contact and mental well-being among students, a few in-person class sessions can be conveniently held to supplement virtual lectures. That is, the traditional and virtual formats of university teaching/learning should coexist in some proportions of the required attendance as we target to not only benefit from the advantages of virtual campus but also minimize its undesired effects.

The journey of a thousand miles... A reflection on the early years of my PhD journey

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Abstract

In this article, I will describe the challenges I faced during the first two years of my journey as a PhD student at the University of Ottawa. I employ the narrative inquiry approach to shed insight into my lived experiences as a doctoral student. Some of the challenges I have encountered include difficulty in studying online from a resource-constrained country, problems with finance, combining multiple roles, and dealing with pregnancy as a doctoral student. I conclude that adequate support system including financial, emotional, and psychological support is critical in succeeding as a doctoral student in Canada.

Introduction

The pursuit of a PhD is an ambitious endeavor that requires a deep commitment to a specific field of study. It is a long and arduous journey, encompassing coursework, several years of intensive research, and the completion of a dissertation. Those who sail through this academic path create new knowledge, discover new ideas, and develop new skills. In a journey of about 5,000 miles, I flew from Accra in Ghana to Ottawa in Canada to be a doctoral student. Throughout my own experience as a PhD student, I have encountered both moments of triumph and moments of struggle. In this article I will share some challenges I have faced during my first and second year, shedding light on performing multiple roles, ill health, challenges with technology, and financial problems.

I employ the narrative reflective approach in recounting these experiences. The narrative reflective approach is a qualitative research method that combines elements of storytelling and reflective practice to gain insights into a particular phenomenon or experience (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Through such narratives, individuals can use their stories as a medium to facilitate understanding and generate new knowledge (Chambers, 2003).

My journey from home (Ghana)

Ghana is a beautiful country with about 30 million people located along the west coast of Africa. It is home to over 100 ethnic groups, each with unique traditions, languages, and festivals. The Akan ethnic group located in the southern part of the country is the largest, and I identify as one of them. The people of Ghana are known to be friendly, industrious, and resilient. They have deep-rooted values of family, community, and respect for the elderly. Globally, Ghana is known as the largest producer of cocoa beans, the raw material used in the production of chocolate (Peprah, 2019). However, Ghana is a less developed country as compared to Canada.

It was in September 2020 when I took the decision to enroll for a PhD program. I had scored ten A's, graduating as the best postgraduate student in my college at the University of Ghana. I was filled with joy when my professors congratulated me and urged me to pursue a doctoral program. The advice was welcome since I had previously considered pursuing a career in educational research. But the big question was, how do I start? As I always do, I googled 'How to start a PhD' and I also watched several videos on YouTube on enrolling for a PhD. The first step was to develop a research intent and search for a suitable supervisor. By October 2020, I have developed my research intent. The first rule of Jabre et al. (2021) ten rules for choosing a PhD supervisor was my guide. Jabre et al. (2021) emphasize that a student's research intent should align with the interest of a prospective supervisor. Therefore, I sent a couple of emails to some professors who have publications in my field of interest. I was full of excitement when one professor responded and scheduled an interview to consider my research interest. Subsequently, I was admitted as a doctoral student at the Faculty of Education of the University of Ottawa in fall 2021.

COVID-19 and immigration hurdles

Gaining admission into a PhD program and starting a PhD are not the same. As Mantai and Marrone (2022) indicate, we do not sufficiently know what it takes to be admitted into a PhD program. Our expectations and dreams of achievement may seem easy and smooth until the program begins. I started my PhD coursework in Ghana due to COVID-19 restrictions and immigration hurdles. During the Fall 2021 academic session, it was a requirement for people to vaccinate before they could travel outside Ghana. However, I could not travel to Canada because I had difficulty getting vaccinated. Although Ghana had received limited supplies of COVID-19 vaccines by the second quarter of 2021, priority was given to health workers, the aged,

people with underlying health conditions and security personnel (Amo-Adjei et al., 2022). Students at the time were not part of the priority list. Fortunately for me, the University of Ottawa had an arrangement that allowed students to study remotely. This enabled me to complete all my PhD coursework from Ghana.

For international students to be able to travel to Canada, they must obtain a study permit from the Canadian immigration agency. This requirement also contributed to my inability to travel to Canada during the fall session of 2021. My first application for a Canadian study permit was refused due to my inability to provide some documentation to prove that I had enough funds for my study. This problem is widespread; Gopal (2016) recounts the pronounced difficulty for students from developing nations to obtain accurate information on immigration and visa documentation, leading to a higher rate of visa refusal.

Four roles at a time: A wife, a mother, a teacher, and a student

Traditionally, women in most parts of Ghana are considered homemakers in the sense that the responsibility of taking care of the home becomes their sole responsibility. This mostly involves performing the role of a wife and a mother. However, the quest by families in recent times to lift themselves out of poverty has resulted in more women taking up economic roles to support their husbands. Abraham et al. (2017) estimate that the labour force participation for women in Ghana is about 71.1%. As a wife and a mother of three, I also work as a professional teacher to support my husband in taking care of our home. The desire to take up an additional role as a student arose from my interest in building a career in research, and also to earn more income to support the home. As evident in a report by Abraham et al. (2017), there is a correlation between higher educational qualifications and higher income.

As a wife and a mother, I play the role of a housekeeper. This involves cooking delicious meals for my husband, children, and even visitors. I ensure that the house is swept and kept clean, and wash my husband's clothes and that of the children. In a traditional Ghanaian home, one of the most essential functions of the wife is to accord respect to the husband. She is also expected to love and care for him. She must be sympathetic towards his course as long as it is in the best interest of the family (Kpoor, 2015). I must admit that combining this role with a doctoral study is quite difficult. But fortunately for me, I have a husband who understands the value of education and its impact on the family's well-being. My husband has been supportive by learning how to cook and has been assisting me in cleaning.

As part of my duty as a teacher, I prepare my lesson notes, and weekly forecast, and search for the appropriate teaching and learning materials that are deemed fit for the lesson for a particular week. I must prepare assignments that will be given to learners after every lesson to ensure my targeted objectives have been met. I also take the time to provide feedback to learners and answer their questions. Furthermore, I ensure that I stay up to date with the latest trends in education so that I can provide the best learning materials for my learners. I also take the time to evaluate my learners' progress and adjust my teaching methods accordingly. I provide feedback to parents and guardians to keep them informed of their children's progress. Likewise, I also provide guidance and support to learners to help them navigate their learning journey.

Indeed, balancing life and academics can be demanding, and at times, it can be challenging to meet deadlines, handle a heavy workload, build a supportive network, and make important decisions (Glettler, 2021; Utami, 2019). To navigate through these multiple roles, I have developed various coping mechanisms including self-discipline and constant planning. By carefully organizing my

time and prioritizing tasks, I can ensure that my academic work and my role as a wife, teacher, and mother receive the attention they require.

Studying in a different time zone

The time zone for Accra in Ghana is Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and that of Ottawa in Canada is the Eastern Standard Time (EST). Depending on the time of the year, Accra is either four or five hours ahead of Ottawa. Mostly, my online class sessions begin at 5 PM Eastern time and last for three hours. This implies that I would have to be in class up to 2 AM. This came along with its own challenges. One was a reduction in my sleeping hours. I was sleeping for barely four hours since I had to wake up at 6 am to organize myself for work and prepare the children for school. This made me feel fatigued during the day. It also got me worried because I was afraid I could break down. As reported by the American Psychological Association, "working against a person's natural sleep cycle causes sleep disorders, as well as fatigue. Fatigue […] decreases cognitive abilities and reflexes and makes people more vulnerable to disease" (Price, 2011).

Another challenge I encountered is speaking in class online while the rest of my household are asleep. My husband on several occasions reminded me that I was speaking loudly and needed to decrease my voice because they were sleeping. It was therefore necessary for me to be considerate. Other studies elsewhere have recounted similar experiences international students faced when they studied in different time zones. Ruiz and Khairi (2020) report that several students had to make changes to their sleep routine, either by going to bed too early or too late, so that they could adapt to their class schedule. These changes were reported to have degraded their sleep quality, and they were unable to perform as they would like. It diminished their participation and motivation and negatively impacted on their engagement in help sessions.

Internet connectivity challenges

In most parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, access to stable internet is a challenge and Ghana is no exception. This has been the result of inefficient and outdated internet infrastructure, lack of regulatory guidelines, and frequent fibre cable cuts by thieves (Fosu, 2011). Studying online from Ghana demands access to high-speed and stable internet. However, the few internet service providers which are comparatively stable do not come cheap. For example, the cost of a gigabit in Ghana is US $4.10 which is more than 2% of the daily minimum wage of an average Ghanaian (Nyabor, 2019). In my attempt to install a broadband network which is faster and more stable than a mobile network in my residence, I discovered that the fibre cables connecting to my community had been stolen. I therefore had to rely on the mobile internet. There were several instances where my internet disconnected during online class sessions. This made studying and submitting assignments exceedingly difficult for me.

Financial constraints

Most PhD students face financial problems. The situation is even more challenging for international students and students with dependents, who have additional financial responsibilities (Laframboise et al., 2023). Several factors contribute to this, including insufficient funding from grant agencies and within universities (Laframboise et al., 2022). In Canada, universities charge significant fees, which can be difficult for students to afford, especially those who do not have access to financial aid. In addition to tuition, students must pay for books, research materials, and other academic expenses. At the University of Ottawa, I was fortunate to receive two scholarships that cover only my tuition fees. However, I faced major challenges when I moved from Accra to Ottawa in my second year of study with my family. Living expenses in Canada are extremely high and I needed to raise $3,000 a month to cater for myself and my

children. My husband needed to work more hours to sustain us.

Surprises

During the winter session of my first year, I fell sick. I visited the doctor on two occasions and was diagnosed with a stomach ulcer. After taking medication for a month, the sickness persisted. I continued to experience back pain, frequent urination, and nausea. One day when my husband came home from work and saw me lying on the couch with the house unkept, he asked rhetorically, "Are you sure you are not pregnant?" It was there that I realized I could be in deep trouble. The next morning, I visited the doctor and requested a pregnancy test. To my surprise, it was positive. It shook me to the bone and took me off guard. I called my husband in tears and told him it was positive. I was worried that I could not continue my doctoral studies. However, he assured me that everything was going to be okay.

Attrition rates for PhD students is between 40 to 60%, and for women, pregnancy has been listed as one of the key factors contributing to it (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2018). Pregnancy is challenging for everyone and for a doctoral student performing other roles, it can be overwhelming. The need to balance the demands of PhD program with physical and emotional changes that comes with pregnancy is incredibly stressful. With deadlines and coursework to complete it is usually difficult to find time to rest. Pregnancy causes fatigue, nausea, and other symptoms that can affect a student's ability to attend classes (Close et al., 2016).

With the help of my husband, I prioritized self-care by regularly visiting the doctor, taking proper nutrition, and exercising. Though it was difficult, I found the experience rewarding. With perseverance, I completed my PhD coursework, scoring an A in all selected courses. Subsequently, on 13th August 2022, which happens to be the birthday of my husband, I delivered a bouncing baby boy.

Figure 1

New baby boy arrives (Abigail Abena Owusuwaa Manu)

The struggle for success

After completing the PhD coursework, next on the agenda was to complete the comprehensive examination. A PhD comprehensive examination is a rigorous evaluation process that doctoral candidates must complete to demonstrate their mastery of the field of study. This examination typically takes place after the student has completed all their coursework and is preparing to move into the research phase of their degree. The comprehensive exam ensures that the student has a broad and deep understanding of their area of study and the ability to synthesize and apply their knowledge to real-world problems.

At the University of Ottawa, the comprehensive examination comprises a written and oral component. The written portion consists of a series of essay questions or research papers, while the oral portion typically involves a presentation and defence of the student's work. Preparing for a PhD comprehensive exam can be a daunting task, but there are several strategies that students can use to help them succeed. These include reviewing course materials, conducting extensive research, and seeking guidance and feedback from faculty members and peers.

Inspired by scoring an A in all five PhD courses, I felt I was ready for the comprehensive examination. This was in the spring session of 2022 and within the third trimester of my pregnancy.

A week before the questions for the comprehensive examination were submitted to me, I was admitted to the hospital. However, I was determined to write the examination, hoping to get better. The sickness persisted for the entire period I sat for the comprehensive exams, but I managed to submit my response to the committee responsible for my evaluation. After a few weeks, I got another shock in my life when I received an email that I have failed the comprehensive examination.

Failing a comprehensive examination can be a challenging and disheartening experience. However, it is important to remember that failing an exam does not define your intelligence or worth as a person. Instead, it is an opportunity to learn from your mistakes and improve your skills and study habits. One of the first steps I took after failing the examination was to meet with my professor to discuss my performance and identify areas where I need to improve. Fortunately for me, he provided me with specific feedback and offered tips on how to better prepare for the re-sit exams.

Failing an exam can be stressful and cause feelings of anxiety or depression (Kumari & Jain, 2014). My husband provided support by encouraging me and urging me on. It is important that students who fail exams reach out to friends, family, or a mental health professional for support. It is also important to recognize that everyone experiences setbacks and failures, and it is okay to ask for help when you need it. With perseverance and hard work, everyone can overcome obstacles and succeed. I passed both my written and oral exams the second time and was full of excitement.

Concluding Reflections

PhD students are faced with numerous challenges that impact their program completion rate (Gao, 2021). The pursuit of a PhD requires dedication, extensive reading, and extensive research. An individual must be psychologically and emotionally prepared for such a journey. There are a variety of challenges that every PhD student is likely to encounter, including inadequate funding, personal and social problems, inadequate support systems, and strained relationships with one's supervisor or fellow PhD students (Gao, 2021). Despite that, I would strongly advise anyone who is interested in studying in Canada for a PhD to take the shot but choose a program that provides students with both academic and well-being assistance. At the University of Ottawa, the Faculty of Education provides students with support services including administrative, academic, mental health, library, and financial services. When students are supported throughout their academic journey, they become satisfied, motivated, encouraged, and exhibit high performance, which tends to reduce student dropout rates (Johnson et al., 2022). Mantai and Marrone (2022) stress the importance of providing social support services such as research networks and collaboration, friendship, and seminar groups to empower students to develop their sense of becoming researchers. So far, I have been fortunate to have received social and emotional support from my husband, professor, and colleague doctoral students.

As part of a growing body of literature exploring graduate student experiences, I aimed to contribute through the narration of my lived experience by emphasizing the perspective of international students, since their experiences depend upon the circumstances in which they are. The results of this study may provide future researchers with a deeper understanding of the subjective lived experiences of international students pursuing a PhD in Canada and around the globe.

Le parcours de doctorant: Ligne d'arrivée ou ligne de mire?

Elie Ndala & Hannah Sutherland

Candidat au doctorat, boursier Ricard et enseignant de formation, Elie Ndala s'intéresse à l'insertion sociale et professionnelle des immigrants en contexte francophone ainsi qu'à la reconstruction des relations interculturelles dans la sphère éducative. Il provient d'un foyer d'immigrants de première génération et est déterminé à contribuer au changement menant à la reconnaissance, à la réparation et à la réconciliation entre sa communauté d'origine et celle qui l'a adopté.

Hannah Sutherland est étudiante au doctorat. Bien qu'elle ait été formée pour enseigner les mathématiques et les sciences, ses premières expériences dans le domaine de la recherche en éducation l'ont amenée à s'intéresser au processus de résilience langagière des élèves francophones. Sa thèse de maîtrise portait sur le rôle des écoles de langue française dans ce processus.

Abstract

Cet article examine l'expérience doctorale dans un contexte post-pandémique en utilisant une approche autoethnographique. Les restrictions pandémiques ont eu un impact significatif sur les étudiants des institutions postsecondaires, entraînant l'annulation de cours, l'adoption de l'enseignement hybride et des changements dans l'administration des travaux. Face à l'isolement et à l'incertitude quant aux perspectives de carrière, les auteurs ont cherché à donner du sens à leurs aspirations doctorales en engageant des échanges réguliers oralement ou par écrit.

L'accent est mis sur les perspectives contemporaines de l'expérience doctorale, en particulier les relations identitaires et les normes sociales. La méconnaissance des réalités du marché de l'emploi académique suscite des doutes quant à la valeur de l'expérience doctorale. Afin d'examiner et de critiquer la culture institutionnelle des études doctorales, les auteurs ont adopté une approche autoethnographique, analysant des récits personnels pour mettre en évidence les moments quotidiens peu visibles et les normes sociales qui façonnent cette expérience.

L'analyse sera ensuite suivie d'une discussion approfondie sur les thèmes émergents et leur lien avec la littérature existante. Cette approche permet non seulement de porter un regard critique sur la culture institutionnelle, mais aussi de combler certaines lacunes de la recherche existante en faisant part d'expériences personnelles.

Mot clés : *autoethnographie, études supérieures, perspectives d'emploi, culture institutionnelle, identité*

Introduction

Les dernières années ont été marquées par des restrictions pandémiques qui ont causé des bouleversements dans plusieurs sphères de la société, incluant les institutions postsecondaires où les populations étudiantes ont dû négocier les annulations de cours, l'enseignement hybride et la modification de l'administration de travaux, pour ne nommer que ces éléments (Cuerrier et al., 2020). Bien que les motifs qui poussent les étudiants à s'inscrire à un programme de troisième cycle puissent varier, l'impact de cette décision sur leur avenir professionnel, en particulier pour ceux et celles aspirant à une première insertion professionnelle, est déterminant. Le parcours doctoral débute généralement à un stade de vie où les individus désirent établir une carrière et fonder une famille, ce qui implique dans plusieurs cas un abandon d'opportunités professionnelles, de stabilité financière et un délai pour la formation d'une famille (Conseil des académies canadiennes [CAC], 2021). Les conclusions de discussions de groupe menées auprès de 67 étudiants1 diplômés suivant un programme d'études en sciences humaines ou en sciences naturelles révèlent un engouement initial à l'idée d'entreprendre un parcours doctoral, mais dont l'expérience est graduellement teintée par un désespoir quant aux possibilités d'emploi suivant la collation des grades (Sekuler et al., 2013). Cependant, contrairement aux défis liés aux retombées de la formation doctorale, les facteurs qui influencent le parcours des étudiants ne sont pas suffisamment documentés aux études supérieures (Brailford, 2010; Sverdlick et al., 2018).

Dans ce contexte s'inscrit la remise en question de notre propre quête doctorale, tant sur le plan identitaire que professionnel. Conscients de l'isolement et de l'incertitude quant aux possibilités de carrière dans notre domaine, l'éducation, les auteurs ont décidé de se réunir régulièrement pour donner un sens à leurs aspirations doctorales en contexte post-pandémique. Ces échanges à l'oral et occasionnellement sous forme de sessions d'écriture ont permis de contrer la solitude en nous engageant dans une poursuite informelle vers la transparence et l'authenticité tout en approfondissant nos réflexions sur le parcours doctoral, et ce, selon les particularités de nos expériences respectives. Dans cet article, nous proposons des perspectives contemporaines sur notre expérience doctorale, en nous appuyant sur les rapports identitaires façonnés par l'intériorisation de normes sociales et nos caractéristiques personnelles (Di Méo, 2002).

Mise en contexte

La formation doctorale représente l'un des acquis les plus précieux dans le milieu universitaire et, à quelques exceptions près, correspond au grade le plus élevé décerné par une institution postsecondaire (Termium, 2015). À l'Université d'Ottawa, le cheminement général d'un doctorat en éducation requiert un total de six cours (18 crédits), suivis d'un examen de synthèse, d'une proposition de thèse et enfin de la rédaction de la thèse. Le guide général offert sur la page web de l'Université s'étend sur treize trimestres, non loin de la durée moyenne de complétion de 4 ans et 8 mois, selon les données de Statistique Canada (2023).

Malgré le nombre croissant de diplômés, les réalités du marché de l'emploi universitaire semblent méconnues, ce qui induit de nombreux étudiants à penser que, peu de temps après avoir obtenu leur diplôme, ils pourront accéder à un poste de professeur à temps plein. Les contenus promotionnels mis de l'avant sur les sites web de la plupart des institutions postsecondaires contribuent à nourrir ce sentiment, selon Brailsford (2010). Toutefois, Etmanski et ses collaborateurs (2017) nous informent que la tendance actuelle montre plutôt l'inverse, avec la majorité des diplômés se dirigeant vers des emplois non académiques et seulement 20% des finissants qui réussissent à obtenir un poste (Boniskowa et al., 2022). Qui plus est, la

situation est plus précaire pour les diplômés récents sur une échelle comparative de cinq ans (CAC, 2021). Par conséquent, il est clair que l'investissement que représente un doctorat pour les étudiants qui aspirent à une insertion professionnelle peut soulever des doutes quant au sens de leur expérience et de leur place dans la communauté dont ils désirent faire partie.

La formation doctorale comporte généralement une composante relative à la construction identitaire des étudiants tout au long de leur parcours, car l'engagement dans l'apprentissage est intrinsèquement lié à cette construction (Seyri & Rezaee, 2022; Baker & Luttaka, 2010). Ainsi, la négociation des rôles qu'ils sont amenés à jouer découle en grande partie de leur interprétation de la culture académique et scolaire, incluant une compréhension de ce qu'ils sont censés être et des attentes intériorisées, à la fois en tant qu'individus que professionnels. L'intériorisation de ces perceptions peut donc, selon Foot et ses collaborateurs (2014), conduire à des transitions entre plusieurs identités, certaines étant maintenues tandis que d'autres sont abandonnées en fonction des valeurs individuelles. Les auteurs ajoutent que ce processus peut entraîner des déceptions ayant comme conséquences un sentiment d'inefficacité, d'échec personnel ou d'appréhensions face à l'avenir lorsque ces transitions mènent à des expériences négatives (Foot et al., 2014).

Sans nous attarder sur les séquences de cours où les étudiants ont l'occasion d'interagir de manière plus structurée avec les membres de leur cohorte, la période suivant la complétion des cours, soit la rédaction de la thèse est souvent caractérisée par un principe d'autonomie et d'autogestion à long terme, ainsi que par la faible institutionnalisation d'étapes intermédiaires obligatoires avant la finalisation de la thèse (Chao et al., 2015). Les domaines tels que les sciences sociales et l'éducation entraînent parfois les étudiants à se

retrouver en silos isolés en raison de la variabilité et de la divergence des projets de recherche par rapport à ceux de la direction de thèse ainsi que l'indépendance de la recherche et la rédaction (CAC, 2021). Les taux d'abandon des études doctorales ont d'ailleurs été significativement associés à l'isolement (Janta et al., 2014), bien que les institutions d'enseignement supérieur aient reconnu l'insuffisance des ressources pour aider les étudiants inscrits à gérer ce sentiment (Ali & Kohun, 2006).

En dépit de cette réalité, l'éducation doctorale continue d'être axée vers la titularisation académique, ce qui n'est plus représentatif d'un marché du travail aux opportunités toujours plus restreintes (Horinko et al., 2021). L'impossibilité d'entrevoir la lumière au bout du tunnel mène plusieurs, dont les auteurs eux-mêmes, à se questionner sur l'expérience doctorale et ses débouchées en retraçant les facteurs qui les ont poussés à choisir de compléter des études doctorales. Comment l'expérience au sein de leur institution a-t-elle affecté leur cheminement académique au fil du temps ? Y associe-t-on une ligne d'arrivée ou une ligne de mire ?

Méthodologie

Dans le cadre de cet article, nous avons choisi d'entreprendre une approche autoethnographique. Cette approche nous permet de bâtir des narrations personnelles qui examinent/critiquent la culture institutionnelle évoquée dans l'introduction et la mise en contexte (Holman Jones et al., 2013). Pour Adams et al. (2017), l'autoethnographie permet non seulement d'examiner et de critiquer, mais aussi de mettre l'accent sur des moments quotidiens peu visibles dans d'autres recherches et de produire un texte accessible à un large public. Cela correspond bien à notre objectif, qui est non seulement de partager nos expériences dans l'espoir que les autres se sentent moins seuls, mais aussi de réfléchir à la

manière dont ces expériences ont été façonnées par les normes en vigueur.

Adams et al. (2017) suggèrent que l'autoethnographie se situe à l'intersection de l'autobiographie et l'ethnographie. Bien qu'elle examine des expériences antérieures afin de construire un texte (comme l'autobiographie), elle est aussi basée sur une expérience culturelle, et une représentation/description palpable de cette expérience est présente dans le texte. Ellis et Bochner (2000) insistent sur le lien entre le personnel et le culturel en disant que la réflexion personnelle doit être accompagnée d'une réflexion sur les composantes sociale et culturelle de l'expérience. En fait, cet examen doit évoquer les nuances d'une expérience, montrer la façon dont elle est impliquée dans des phénomènes culturels et la façon dont elle diminue certaines voix (Holman Jones et al., 2013). En accord avec ces éléments, Rondeau (2011) souligne que l'autoethnographie entreprise à travers un processus réflexif et créatif se révèle être une approche gagnante pour mettre en mots un vécu complexe tout en préservant une cohérence entre la compréhension de soi-même, d'autrui, du monde ainsi que l'interprétation qui en découle.

Si l'approche autoethnographique permet de critiquer ou de proposer des alternatives à la culture institutionnelle, elle permet également de partager des expériences personnelles pour combler les lacunes de la recherche (Adams et al., 2017). Dans notre cas, ces expériences personnelles prendront la forme de narrations personnelles des auteurs, bien que nous aurions pu choisir d'autres formes telles que des nouvelles ou de la poésie (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Méthode d'analyse

Lorsque nous avons décidé de rédiger cet article, nous souhaitions qu'il reflète toutes les discussions informelles que nous avions eues au cours des derniers mois concernant les défis liés à l'obtention d'un doctorat. Bien que nos parcours soient différents, nous avons remarqué que nous étions tous deux confrontés à des défis similaires. Nous avons donc pensé qu'il serait pertinent d'exprimer ces défis à partir de nos points de vue respectifs, puis de comparer et d'analyser nos histoires ensemble. Conscients que l'analyse peut être nébuleuse sur le plan méthodologique, nous gardons en mémoire la particularité de l'analyse qualitative en mode écriture, puisque l'écriture est au cœur de l'approche autoethnographique selon Dubé (2016):

> *Dans l'analyse de matériel écrit, le processus itératif de lecture/écriture/lecture/écriture/ [...] permet l'émergence de nouvelles significations. Le sens se dégage et des constats apparaissent. Cette méthode d'analyse qualitative d'écriture en texte suivi permet davantage que les autres méthodes l'émergence spontanée de la créativité et de l'expression libre. (p.16).*

Nous avons d'abord rédigé individuellement des narrations personnelles retraçant le contexte derrière nos ambitions académiques en soulignant les défis rencontrés en cours de route. Afin de nous assurer que ces narrations correspondaient à une approche autoethnographique, nous avons suivis les conseils de Cooper et Lilyea (2022), qui proposent les méthodes suivantes pour entreprendre l'écriture autoethnographique : énumérer chronologiquement les principaux événements ou expériences de vie qui se rapportent au sujet (ici, le parcours doctoral), décrire ces événements, leur pertinence et en quoi ils contribuent à une meilleure compréhension de soi et de l'environnement dans lequel nous évoluons. Les auteurs suggèrent d'inclure toutes les pensées dès ce stade, puis de décider ultérieurement ce qui mérite d'être intégré dans la narration personnelle.

Une fois nos narrations rédigées, nous les avons lues tour à tour afin de nous familiariser avec toutes les données. Ensuite, nous avons

entrepris une analyse en mode écriture (Dubé, 2016) en réévaluant et revisitant nos moments les plus vulnérables pour assurer une clarté et authenticité dans nos propos. Bien que nous ayons eu quelques idées sur les thèmes communs potentiels en raison de nos échanges informels précédents, nous avons plutôt tenu à laisser émerger les thèmes qui reliaient nos récits. Ensuite, nous avons discuté des thèmes communs que chacun d'entre nous avait déduits avant de parvenir à un consensus sur ceux qui figureraient dans notre discussion. Nous avons ensuite rédigé conjointement la discussion et la conclusion. Nous présentons ci-dessous nos narrations personnelles, suivies de notre discussion sur les résultats de notre analyse et les limites de celle-ci.

Le cas d'Elie

Cette réflexion émerge des expériences qui ont façonné mes aspirations professionnelles, aboutissant finalement à l'ambition de poursuivre des études doctorales en éducation. Les éléments clés de cette évolution sont le contexte préalable à l'admission, l'entrée au doctorat et l'évolution de mes attentes. Les anecdotes qui ont ravivé mon sens de l'humanité lors de mes échanges hebdomadaires avec Hannah portent une dimension plus authentique à cette réflexion.

Si je devais résumer mon parcours scolaire en un mot, ce serait « ajustement ». Sans minimiser le périple qui a conduit ma famille et moi de la République démocratique du Congo au Canada juste à temps pour ma première année primaire, les quatre déménagements qui ont suivi dans différentes régions du Québec, puis au Nouveau-Brunswick, ont indéniablement influencé ma perception de l'éducation. Ces changements fréquents d'environnement, motivés par la recherche de stabilité socio-économique de mes parents, ont fait naître en moi un désir ardent de trouver rapidement ma place dans chaque nouvel environnement. L'école est alors devenue un lieu où je pouvais absorber les particularités locales de mon entourage : l'accent, les centres d'intérêt et les références culturelles qui les unissaient. Prêt à tout pour intégrer des cercles d'amis parfois soudés depuis plusieurs années et, peut-être pour dissimuler le sentiment d'altérité que je ressentais dans un environnement scolaire où mon apparence me faisait sortir du lot, j'ai rapidement abandonné mes coutumes congolaises afin de m'intégrer totalement jusqu'à la fin du secondaire.

L'éducation n'a jamais été une voie que j'ai sérieusement envisagée. Les attentes de mes parents étaient trop élevées pour que je considère autre chose qu'une carrière en médecine ou en droit, par exemple. Dès mon plus jeune âge, j'ai perçu dans les discours de ces derniers une forte exigence quant à l'obtention d'un diplôme garantissant un coussin financier. Comment aurais-je pu ignorer des remarques telles que « c'est toi qui remplaceras ta mère à la clinique plus tard ? ». Ce n'est qu'après une première année éprouvante dans un programme préparatoire aux sciences de la santé que j'ai trouvé le courage d'effectuer un virage vers un baccalauréat en éducation, malgré les mises en garde familiales.

Ma curiosité naturelle et mon désir d'apprendre à travers les relations humaines se sont alliés à un besoin de surmonter l'anxiété de prendre ma place au sein d'un groupe. Ainsi, pour la première fois, j'ai ressenti que je pouvais mettre mes compétences au service d'une carrière dans l'enseignement. Par mes origines et horizons multiples, mon bagage socioculturel est devenu un atout pour établir des liens avec des jeunes issus de différentes communautés et mon sens de l'observation m'a permis d'identifier rapidement leurs besoins et vulnérabilités. Cette transition m'a aussi permis de développer un sens de l'initiative qui m'a conduit vers des postes de mentor, d'assistant de laboratoire et de directeur d'un camp de perfectionnement langagier.

Bien que durant mon parcours, j'aie reçu des commentaires positifs de mes professeurs et

que j'aie excellé dans mes cours, ce sont les défis rencontrés lors de mes stages en milieu scolaire et sur le marché du travail qui m'ont poussé à reconsidérer mon désir de faire de l'enseignement une carrière à long terme. Par exemple, lors de la complétion de mon baccalauréat, je n'ai reçu aucune invitation d'entretien ni d'offre d'emploi. En pleine pénurie de main-d'œuvre, les directions d'écoles francophones venaient fréquemment rendre visite aux étudiants finissants avec des contrats en main donnant suite à un entretien réussi. La plupart des membres de ma cohorte ne semblaient pas avoir les mêmes difficultés à s'insérer dans le système, particulièrement ceux qui avaient comme moi un réseau bien nanti dans la région. Cette situation a intensifié mes préoccupations. Lorsqu'un contrat de suppléance d'une semaine s'est finalement présenté, j'ai saisi cette opportunité pour mettre à profit mes compétences avec résilience et détermination, malgré le sentiment persistant de ne pas trouver ma place au sein de l'équipe-école. À la fin de ce qui s'est révélé être quatre mois de suppléance pénibles, je n'ai pas témoigné d'un intérêt manifeste à l'idée d'un contrat pour l'année suivante.

C'est avec empressement que j'ai soumis ma candidature pour une maîtrise avec option mémoire, sachant que je voulais cheminer le plus rapidement possible vers le doctorat. Il n'était pas question que je retourne sur les bancs d'école sans avoir obtenu de réponses à mes questions portant sur l'insertion socioprofessionnelle des personnes d'origine immigrante. Complétant mes cours en présentiel à Ottawa, puis rédigeant une partie de mon mémoire confiné à distance chez mes parents durant la pandémie, je n'ai pas initialement remarqué le sentiment d'isolement associé aux études supérieures. Cela est peut-être dû au support et à la révérence de ces derniers envers des études doctorales tout d'un coup plus prestigieuses qu'un simple baccalauréat en éducation. De toute façon, ma stratégie était de m'impliquer

le plus possible dans les comités académiques connexes et la création d'un mouvement antiraciste afin de bâtir un réseau qui me permettrait de cheminer plus aisément tout en faisant une différence dans mon milieu. D'ailleurs, le manque de temps, la diminution des activités sociales et les restrictions financières n'étaient qu'un sacrifice servant de tremplin vers une meilleure qualité de vie une fois le processus doctoral complété. Faute de manque d'information ou d'accompagnement, j'envisageais le parcours doctoral de la même manière que de longues études médicales, où les retombées professionnelles sont presque garanties une fois la formation complétée, en plus d'une liberté d'enseignement et de recherche inatteignable autrement.

Une fois le programme doctoral entamé, la notion de sacrifice payant s'est graduellement dissipée de mon esprit. Bien que la période de complétion des cours m'ait permis de nouer quelques relations, elles étaient difficiles à maintenir face aux emplois du temps chargés que nous semblions tous partager. Un groupe de discussion en ligne a même été instauré, mais il a rapidement perdu en activité après quelques mois. Lors de mes tentatives de réseautage avec des doctorants proches de la soutenance de leur thèse ou venant de l'achever, j'ai été surpris de constater que nos échanges étaient rarement encourageants. Bien que les exigences du parcours doctoral soient indéniables, il était frappant de voir que la plupart de ces finissants, que je considère à ce jour comme des modèles, ne nourrissaient plus l'aspiration d'obtenir un poste académique. En juxtaposant cette idée à la certitude avec laquelle les étudiants de ma cohorte et moi avons tous exprimé notre désir de devenir professeurs d'université lors de notre tout premier cours, j'aurais souhaité que nous puissions entamer une conversation franche sur les difficultés inhérentes à l'atteinte de cet objectif.

Maintenant à mi-chemin de mon parcours, je ne peux certainement pas affirmer que je

partage la même motivation qui m'a conduit jusqu'ici. En observant certains de mes collègues enseignants qui, après quelques années dans les écoles, commencent à acquérir leur première propriété et à fonder une famille, la pertinence de mon investissement académique pèse sur ma conscience. Est-ce que je regrette d'avoir choisi cette voie ? Pas entièrement. Je dois reconnaître le privilège qui accompagne le fait de pouvoir poursuivre des études supérieures dans une institution de qualité et de bénéficier de sources de financement non négligeables. Cependant, je constate une incertitude lancinante qui, cette dernière année, m'a poussé à diversifier mes options en envisageant plusieurs opportunités d'emploi m'éloignant par moment de mon engagement doctoral. J'ai le sentiment que la perspective de devenir professeur d'université est de moins en moins réalisable, ce qui me laisse souvent perplexe et craintif face à l'avenir.

Le cas d'Hannah

Pour rédiger cette réflexion, j'ai énuméré les événements de ma vie qui m'ont amené à ce stade et qui m'ont conduit à entreprendre des études doctorales. J'essaierai de montrer comment chaque événement a contribué à une certaine compréhension de soi ou, à tout le moins, à une compréhension de la culture et de ce que c'est que de fonctionner dans cette institution.

L'enseignement m'a toujours semblé être un plan B. J'envisageais d'autres carrières, je les testais pendant un certain temps, puis je les rejetais pour une multitude de raisons. L'enseignement semblait être un choix sûr, un choix qui mènerait à la sécurité de l'emploi – c'est du moins ce que l'on m'avait promis dès mes premiers jours d'immersion française. En outre, certaines des personnes les plus influentes de ma vie étaient des enseignants ou avaient travaillé dans le système d'éducation de près ou de loin.

Je me demande souvent si ma décision aurait été différente si ma relation avec le système scolaire et ses acteurs n'avait pas été aussi positive. Dans ma famille, l'école passait avant tout. Les bonnes notes et les résultats élevés étant non seulement encouragés, mais attendus. J'étais ce que certains appellent une « bonne élève », un terme que je considère aujourd'hui comme un synonyme d'obéissance, de calme et probablement de lutte contre une bonne dose d'anxiété de performance. Le fait d'être performante à l'école, parce qu'il s'agissait d'une partie importante de ma vie familiale, est devenu un motif de fierté et, honnêtement, l'une des choses que j'appréciais le plus chez moi.

Lorsque j'ai terminé mon deuxième stage d'enseignement, j'ai compris que quelque chose n'allait pas. Je ne me voyais pas jouer ce rôle pendant les 25 prochaines années de ma vie. Je me suis donc tournée vers la seule chose que je connaissais : plus d'études. Quand j'ai obtenu mon baccalauréat en éducation, je savais que je commencerais ma maîtrise à l'automne suivant plutôt que de préparer ma salle de classe. J'ai ressenti une immense culpabilité à l'idée de dire cela à qui que ce soit. Alors que la poursuite des études serait célébrée dans plusieurs autres domaines, l'attente des enseignants de rester dans leur rôle quoi qu'il arrive, de « le faire pour les enfants » est omniprésente. On m'a fait sentir que je n'étais qu'une donnée de plus, une enseignante de plus qui ne resterait pas dans la profession au-delà de cinq ans. Des commentaires ont été faits sur mon dévouement à mes élèves et sur mes capacités en tant qu'éducatrice et femme (p. ex. « quoi, tu détestes les enfants ? »). Personnellement, je pense que cela témoigne des croyances plus larges selon lesquelles l'enseignement est une vocation et les femmes des nourricières, et du jugement porté sur toute personne qui s'écarte de cette tradition.

Ma maîtrise s'est déroulée en ligne en raison de la pandémie et a nécessité un séjour chez mes

parents qui a duré 26 mois de plus que prévu. Bien que j'aie eu la chance de pouvoir rester chez mes parents pendant cette période, cette expérience m'a fait prendre conscience de l'isolement qui s'annonçait et de la difficulté d'expliquer ce que je faisais toute la journée. J'ai conservé mon identité de bonne élève pendant cette période, mais j'ai constaté que certains aspects de cette identité étaient ébranlés et remis en question. Oui, je voulais faire une petite différence, comme tous les étudiants diplômés, mais j'ai compris que pour le faire, je devais m'exprimer, et que la recherche, cette chose qui peut être à la fois agréable et exaspérante, semblait être le moyen privilégié.

En arrivant à Ottawa pour mon doctorat, j'espérais pouvoir mettre derrière moi les dernières années d'isolement. J'aurais une cohorte, une sorte de cohésion qui me donnerait l'impression de faire partie de quelque chose de plus grand. Malheureusement, cela n'a pas été le cas. Deux de mes trois cours du premier trimestre étaient en ligne, ce qui m'a donné le même sentiment d'isolement que lors de mes précédents trimestres d'études supérieures. La charge de travail, à laquelle je m'attendais, m'a fait passer des journées entières dans mon appartement à ne parler qu'à moi-même. La question « pourquoi est-ce que je fais ça ? » tournait en boucle dans ma tête plusieurs fois par jour, et la difficulté était que je n'arrivais pas à trouver une réponse suffisante. Bien sûr, j'aimais la recherche, et bien sûr, je voulais un emploi à la fin, mais quand des choses comme l'emploi et le financement ne sont pas certaines, il est difficile de justifier le fait de se soumettre à un processus aussi éreintant.

Pendant ce temps, mon identité entière était engloutie par le fait d'être une étudiante. Ce qui a rendu les choses encore plus difficiles, c'est que j'avais encore tendance à croire qu'être une étudiante, et surtout une bonne étudiante, était l'un des meilleurs aspects de ma personnalité. Je vois maintenant à quel point cela peut être dangereux, en particulier au

niveau du doctorat, où l'identité d'étudiant a tendance à éclipser et à prendre le pas sur tous les autres aspects de la personne. Je dois désapprendre à être une bonne étudiante parce que non seulement la tranquillité, l'obéissance et la peur paralysante ne fonctionneront pas au sein de mon institution, mais elles ne peuvent pas être les caractéristiques qui définissent mon identité. Je suis heureuse que cette identité soit remise en question, et j'espère que cela m'aide à grandir en tant que personne, même si j'ai du mal à résister aux attentes à une culture où ce qui est fait ne sera jamais suffisant. Il y a toujours un autre article à écrire, une autre demande de bourse à préparer, une autre série de révisions. Bien que je choisisse soigneusement les projets dans lesquels je veux m'impliquer, j'ai l'impression de ne jamais en faire assez.

Le seul réconfort que j'ai trouvé c'est que je ne suis pas la seule à me sentir ainsi. Lors de la dernière séance d'un cours doctoral, la professeure nous a invités à parler de nos inquiétudes et de nos peurs. Lorsqu'elle a demandé qui souhaitait travailler dans le milieu universitaire après son doctorat, tout le monde a levé la main, sauf trois personnes. Puis, un air de déception s'est affiché sur tous les visages lorsqu'ils se sont rendu compte qu'il était peu probable que nous trouvions tous un emploi en même temps. Outre l'évidente insécurité de l'emploi, les étudiants ont également fait part de leurs craintes quant au maintien de ce rythme de travail pendant plusieurs années, à l'obtention d'un financement et à l'idée de se perdre dans la quête de leur diplôme. Il semble que nous essayions tous de tenir bon pendant les quatre prochaines années et d'atteindre la prochaine étape en un seul morceau, alors que les exigences et les attentes ne cessent d'augmenter. Le fait est qu'une fois que l'on est identifié comme « bon » (ou plutôt « assez bon »), le système dans lequel évoluent les étudiants exploite cette qualité. Souvent, les attentes institutionnelles font en sorte qu'il soit difficile de dire non sans craindre des répercussions, qu'elles soient financières ou

sociales. Cela ne cessera d'affecter l'estime de soi et l'identité de chacun, à moins que l'on ne fasse quelque chose pour y remédier.

S'il est bon d'exprimer toutes ces préoccupations, il est difficile de déterminer s'il y a de véritables solutions. Bien sûr, nous pouvons faire de notre mieux pour prendre soin de nous-mêmes, mais cela ne signifie pas que le système va s'adapter de quelque manière que ce soit. Les discussions avec Elie, bien qu'extrêmement nécessaires et qui ont fait germer ce projet, nous laissent souvent épuisés et incertains de la marche à suivre. Si nous réfléchissions souvent à des idées qui pourraient nous permettre d'avancer, nous nous inquiétons des répercussions liées aux relations de pouvoir nous cloisonnant au bas de l'échelle, et nous nous demandons si nous travaillons suffisamment pour même oser plaidoyer pour du changement. Notre petite liste de solutions possibles, qui demande souvent un certain niveau de transparence concernant notre avenir, semble ne pas faire grand-chose face à une institution qui s'avère parfois si distante.

Alors, pendant que je me bats pour compléter la prochaine tâche et la suivante, je ne peux qu'espérer. J'espère que j'apprends à mieux me connaître et à devenir une meilleure personne. J'espère que les échanges avec mes collègues ne se contentent pas de soulager temporairement le stress, mais qu'ils débouchent vers des solutions concrètes ou, à tout le moins, vers le courage de demander collectivement un changement. J'espère que je désapprendrai ce que signifie être bonne et que je ferai de mon mieux pour éviter que cette bonté ne soit exploitée. Enfin, j'espère que ce sentiment d'espoir, même s'il est entrecoupé de moments de « pourquoi ? » et de « je ne peux pas », est suffisamment fort pour me porter jusqu'à la fin.

Discussion

Lors de notre analyse, nous avons relevé trois thèmes émergents communs. Bien que nous n'ayons pas vécu ces thèmes exactement de la même manière, ils ont simultanément surgi de nos parcours respectifs et méritent d'être abordés plus en détail.

L'isolement

L'isolement est l'un des principaux défis du parcours doctoral (Vézina, 2021), pouvant sensiblement conduire à l'abandon. Ali et Kohun (2006) identifient certaines manifestations de cet isolement du point de vue social : le manque de communication entre les étudiants eux-mêmes et avec leur faculté ainsi que la confusion quant aux exigences du programme. Dans les cas mentionnés précédemment, cet isolement s'est probablement produit à différentes étapes de notre cheminement aux études supérieures. Pour Elie, il n'a pas été immédiatement ressenti grâce au soutien familial et à une priorité accordée au réseautage. Cependant, les multiples pressions pesant sur l'emploi du temps des doctorants de sa cohorte ont fini par perturber le tissage de relations à long terme qui auraient pu faciliter la navigation commune. Nerad (2012), qui aborde la problématique de l'isolement, avance la création de communautés d'apprentissage comme transition à explorer pour atténuer la dynamique parfois limitante d'une relation superviseur-apprenant. Hannah, elle, fait état d'un profond sentiment d'isolement dès le début de sa maîtrise, qui s'est déroulée exclusivement à distance. Durant cette période, elle a dû lutter avec l'idée de devoir justifier et valoriser son orientation vers la recherche, et ce, devant un entourage qui ne comprendrait pas totalement sa démarche. Ce sentiment s'est intensifié lorsqu'elle a entamé son doctorat, avec une charge de travail accrue, mais sans réelle proximité communautaire autre qu'une réalisation lors d'échanges de groupe que cet inconfort était partagé par d'autres doctorants.

Un manque d'information et de mentorat

Bien que la motivation pour entreprendre un doctorat soit initialement élevée, le processus est souvent mal compris. Les grandes étapes énumérées dans les guides généraux sont prises en compte, mais comme le souligne Brailsford (2010), les universités ont tendance à mettre en avant leurs réussites, ce qui amène les étudiants potentiels à penser que tant que ces exigences sont respectées, la réussite les attend. Elie s'est attaché à l'idée que la complétion d'un doctorat représentait un investissement important à court terme, mais lui offrirait un gain et une sécurité à long terme. Il n'a pas pris conscience qu'il pourrait y avoir plus de perte que de gain, surtout s'il voulait travailler dans le milieu universitaire (Boniskowa et al., 2022). Hannah, qui était presque sûre que la recherche était sa vocation, s'est sentie désillusionnée lorsqu'elle a entendu des récits véridiques sur le processus de doctorat uniquement de la part de ses pairs et non de son université. Même lorsque les étudiants ont insisté pour en savoir plus sur le marché du travail ou sur l'examen de synthèse dans certains cours, ils ont reçu des réponses générales qui reflétaient les consignes figurant sur le site web de l'université. Toute information réellement utile est venue des pairs, ce qui, comme l'a montré notre thème de l'isolement, peut être difficile à obtenir.

L'incertitude face aux perspectives d'emploi

Notre mise en contexte aborde les appréhensions découlant de la tendance actuelle défavorable pour les doctorants souhaitant principalement se frayer une place dans le milieu académique, devenu plus saturé qu'il y a 10 à 15 ans (Towsend, 2021). Étant donné que les solutions demeurent floues tant du côté académique que sur le marché du travail lui-même, Horinko et ses collaborateurs (2021) préconisent dès leur préface l'innovation et l'autonomie dans la gestion de son parcours, quitte à se forger un chemin inédit. Les expériences d'Elie et Hannah sont entremêlées de moments d'incertitude face à

l'avenir, mettant ainsi un terme à leurs attentes, et celles d'un bon nombre de leurs collègues, d'une trajectoire linéaire allant du doctorat à la titularisation. Pour Elie cette voie semblait déjà tracée vers une autonomie professionnelle qu'il ne percevait pas dans l'enseignement secondaire, ce qui l'a poussé à s'investir corps et âme pour atteindre cet objectif. Bien que le soutien et la fierté de ses parents aient influencé sa perception d'être doctorant, les retombées incertaines et insuffisamment abordées dans le programme l'ont fait douter au point de considérer des alternatives parfois peu compatibles avec son domaine d'études. Quant à Hannah, la pression de performer et de faire face à une charge de travail interminable semblait façonner son identité, mais cela en valait la peine tant que cette vocation lui apportait satisfaction. Cependant, une perte de contrôle sur ses engagements et l'absence d'une ligne directrice l'ont également conduite à ressentir un sentiment d'inefficacité, malgré ses performances académiques enviables.

Bien que les résultats de notre analyse reflètent plusieurs points qui ont été discutés dans la littérature existante, il est important de noter qu'elle repose exclusivement sur nos deux narrations personnelles. Par conséquent, cette analyse ne peut en aucun cas être généralisée. Nous sommes conscients des préoccupations liées à la validité scientifique lorsqu'il s'agit d'autoethnographie, et nous reconnaissons que cette approche pourrait rendre notre travail vulnérable à certains biais, étant donné que nous analysons des données générées par nos propres récits de vie, ce qui accorde beaucoup de place à la subjectivité et la nuance de nos opinions.

Afin de minimiser autant que possible la manifestation de biais, nous avons mis en place plusieurs mesures. Tout d'abord, nous avons veillé à lire et à critiquer le travail de l'autre, en prêtant une attention particulière au ton de notre réflexion. De plus, nous avons travaillé conjointement pour déterminer les thèmes

émergents. Enfin, nous avons également effectué des vérifications d'interprétation. Par exemple, si Hannah discutait de l'analyse du parcours d'Elie dans la discussion, elle s'assurait de valider son interprétation auprès d'Elie.

Conclusion

En fin de compte, Elie et Hannah convergent dans une remise en question identitaire qui survient au cours de la première moitié de leur parcours doctoral. Ils s'interrogent sur leur place en tant que doctorants et se demandent si leur ambition d'intégrer le corps professoral académique était dès le départ irréaliste, les piégeant ainsi dans un système où ils sont prédestinés à l'échec et se perdent dans les exigences multiples. En ajoutant à cela les craintes découlant d'expériences négatives palpables à travers souligner que même pour des étudiants performants, l'incertitude inhérente à un tel investissement affecte leur bien-être et peut ébranler leur confiance en eux-mêmes, mais surtout envers l'institution. Bien que l'adhésion à des communautés d'apprentissage se profile comme une voie prometteuse pour atténuer la sensation de progresser de manière cloisonnée tout au long de son parcours (Déri, 2022), d'autres facteurs sont à considérer. Ainsi, si le corps professoral et l'unité académique des études supérieures ne s'impliquent pas suffisamment pour engager ces conversations, partager des ressources et offrir des formations visant à aider les étudiants à faire face à cette réalité, un nombre croissant de doctorants risquent de se retrouver dans la même situation et de souffrir en silence. Il est essentiel qu'un engagement à faire mieux soit marqué par la transparence, non seulement entre étudiants, mais également dans la communication des représentations réalistes du marché du travail. À tout le moins, des ressources qui présentent des voies alternatives devraient être mises à disposition.

Figure 1

Un diplôme près de la ligne d'arrivée évoque le voyage ardu du doctorat, où la quête incertaine ou inaccessible intensifie les défis de l'endurance sur cette voie. Toutefois, c'est précisément dans cette incertitude que réside la beauté profonde de l'exploration et de la croissance personnelle. (Fait avec NightCafe AI)

The written comprehensive exam process: A PhD mix tape

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Abstract

This article explores the comprehensive exam writing process in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa. In this case, the instructional list of how to make a mixtape from the film *High Fidelity* (Frears, 2000) serves as an overarching metaphor. Each step for making the best compilation tape can be applied to a step in the comprehensive exam writing process, from gathering sources for reading lists, to meeting with the committee, to reading, to taking notes, to crafting questions, to surviving (writing) the exams themselves. The research for this article comes primarily from the author's personal experience, as well as informal conversations with peers and colleagues.

Keywords: *Comprehensive exam, writing, mixtape, process*

Introduction

Writing the comprehensive exams, like all aspects of a PhD program, is an individual experience, different for everyone. In the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa, after two semesters of core and optional courses (up to 6), it is time to prepare for comprehensive exams, for which there is a university-specific series of steps to be followed (see Table 1) and specific requirements on which the evaluation is based (see Figure 1). However, the prioritization of specific requirements and complexity of the exam questions often differ from supervisor to supervisor.

Table 1

University of Ottawa comprehensive exam steps (table adapted from the University of Ottawa Faculty of Education website).

University of Ottawa Comprehensive Exam Steps
1. Discuss potential questions with your supervisor
2. Choose/request a committee
3. Search articles/build reading lists
4. Discuss reading lists and question drafts with committee
5. Schedule comprehensive exams writing period
6. Receive your 3 questions from the administration—30 days to answer two of them.
7. After receiving the result, you either rewrite (if the result is not a pass) or move on to an oral defence (if the result is a pass)

Figure 1

University of Ottawa comprehensive exams requirements/evaluation (Comprehensive exams, n.d.)

The difficulty or ease of certain aspects of the process depend on one's personal strengths and experiences. My master's degree is in creative writing, for example, so writing through the conceptual frameworks and refining language was easy, even fun (sometimes), but staying focused on the question and reining in my creative impulses was not.

For this piece, I'm going back to my creative roots, reflecting on the comprehensive exam experience via one of the most famous instructional lists in movie history. In the film *High Fidelity* (Frears, 2000), John Cusack's character Rob Gordon explains, step by step, how to make a mix tape (compilation tape, playlist, etc.), and each of Rob's steps can serve as an apt metaphor for a step in the comprehensive exam writing journey, from gathering sources for your reading lists, to meeting with the committee, to reading, to taking notes, to crafting questions, to surviving (writing) the exams themselves. The emphasis on each step of the comprehensive exam process will ultimately be individual; in other words, the amount of attention I give to each step corresponds to my experience and that of a few colleagues/peers. The steps that need more and less attention may be different in your experience, which brings me to the main objective of this piece: to help demystify,

validate, and normalize how different each person's comprehensive exam process can be, and exemplify at least one way in which it can be more accessible to future students. For me, applying the metaphorical steps of making a mix tape to the comprehensive exam process helped me to feel empowered and confident, to centralize my voice in the final project, while balancing other important elements. "The making of a good compilation tape is a very subtle art," Rob says at the scene's opening, "many dos and don'ts" (Frears, 2000, 1:38:54). Indeed. This piece is an invitation for future students to creatively work *with* and *within* the parameters and structure of academia to come into their personal and professional power. Let's get started!

Figure 2

A digitally painted photo of an LP record player and records (Neiley, 2023)

1. "You're using someone else's poetry to express how you feel: This is a delicate thing" (Frears, 2000, 1:39:01)

In the case of comprehensive exam responses, you are using someone else's *research* to express *what* you feel. Passion for your topic is essential, as the purpose of comprehensive exams is to immerse yourself in existing literature and give the reader a "comprehensive"—or broad and in-depth—review of that literature (Comprehensive exams, n.d.).. The way the questions are written by the committee also must leave room, if not overtly ask, for a critical stance—your own take, your own voice. If the questions are not meaningful to you in some way, it will be very difficult to invest in answering any part of them, let alone offer your insights. You will wind up bored, then: 1) procrastinate, 2) panic, 3) freeze, 4) subconsciously avoid actually answering the questions, (not necessarily in that order). That said, the questions ultimately change based on the committee members' discussion, and the final questions will not be given to you before the beginning of the exam. In the comprehensive exam process, the "delicate thing" is to first *set yourself up* to use someone else's research for expression by gathering articles and crafting questions, balance the interests, expertise, and personalities of the committee, and finally, harness that balance and expression into two 4000-word papers over the course of four weeks.

2. "Takes ages longer than it might seem…" (Frears, 2000, 1:46:25).

You have a month to write both papers, but preparing for the writing "takes ages longer than it might seem." With skimming abstracts, choosing articles, organizing, reorganizing, then coding by theme or pattern, the earlier you start, the better.

Bangers[1] only: Choosing articles

As soon as you begin searching, it helps to sort articles by category of comprehensive exam question: theory/conceptual framework; epistemology/methodology; empirical studies/content (Comprehensive exams, n.d.). My supervisor called these categories "buckets," but I called them "moods," because it

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[1] (slang) an energetic song that is very striking or extraordinary; an exciting piece of media (Merriam Webster)

helped me to associate the process with making a playlist macro-organized by a certain mood. Another aspect of this macro-organization phase is to look at year of publication and author background. Keep in mind, a comprehensive view of the literature centres just as much, perhaps more, around current articles (within the last decade at most) than articles twenty years old or more. At the very least, you will want to balance contemporary and past research (a little Elvis on the bluesy playlist, a little Bruno Mars). Also important is the balance of diverse perspectives. Are the "banger" articles on your list entirely (or mostly) written by people of the same cultural background, age, gender? After all, a whole playlist of Nickelback, One Direction, and Maroon 5 is rather limited in scope. Broaden the horizon of your research!

Once the articles are macro organized, micro-organizing the articles by themes, patterns, and tensions is much easier, like a playlist macro-organized by sadness, then micro-organized by songs about sinking into existential uncertainty, or about teen loneliness, or about rain, or adorned with heartbreaking cello solos.

OMG these three songs are in the same key!: Organizing and coding

There are countless ways to micro-organize your articles within each question category (bucket; mood). I went old school. I did not print out every article, but did primarily use Microsoft Word and the copy/paste functions. I created a blank word document titled, say, "epistemology/methodology," and as I read each article associated with that "mood," I copy pasted quotes of interest, making sure to cite the author, year, and page number. While reading, copying, and pasting, themes emerged across the articles, a bit like noticing that one song starts with the same piano chord on which another song ends. For each theme, I made a colour-coded heading (red, for example), then selected and dragged the related quotes under that heading and changed the text colour to red (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Colour-coded organization
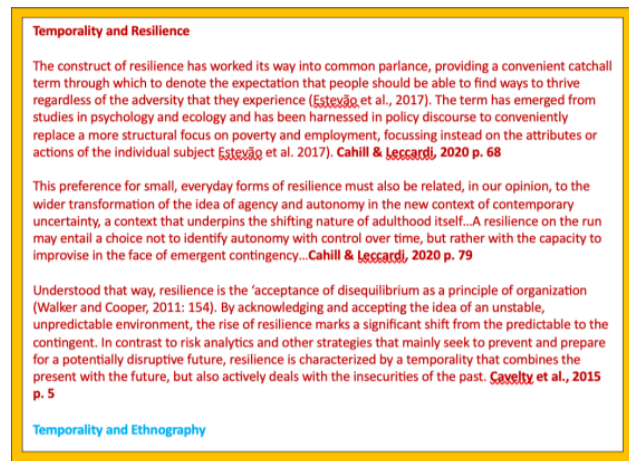
I then transferred everything to NVivo and coded these themes with the same colors and headings, just for easy reference. This may seem like it would take way, way too long, but I am a visual person, and the quote finding, moving, and colour coding not only helped familiarize me even more with the literature, but helped me truly see patterns as well as tensions. If this is not your style, though, some PhD students search for themes more intentionally—*songs with the same piano chords; temporality and resilience*—rather than letting them arise from quotes of interest, and many students use NVivo right from the beginning.

3. "You gotta kick it off with a killer to grab attention" (Frears, 2000, 1:46:27).

As I mentioned before, the attention to be concerned with grabbing first is your own. The first step is to choose relevant articles, the second is to generate meaningful questions. No, you will not know if the questions you generate will be the exact ones you receive from your committee at the time of the exam, but the more you speak with your supervisor and meet with your committee, the bigger your role will be in what the final questions will look like.

There's a COVER version of that song?!: Open-minded question generation

There are varied accounts of the "question generating" stage of comprehensive exam preparation. Some people crafted questions then sent them to a supervisor for feedback, some worked collaboratively with a supervisor to craft questions (Comprehensive exams, n.d.). Afterward, some people sent their questions directly to the committee for approval, while others had meeting with their committee to discuss the questions and reading lists. No matter what route you and your supervisor choose, remaining open-minded about what subtopics the questions cover is key.

Open-mindedness smooths the way for your committee's involvement, but their new ideas can also stoke your own excitement about answering the questions. Crafting questions is an iterative process—though the questions you develop alone or with your supervisor might be excellent, they may or may not be what the committee decides upon. In my case, I loved the questions on which my supervisor and I collaborated, but it was not until one of my committee members asked some questions that my conceptual framework/theory question was transformed. It became frighteningly expansive, and, to me, more fascinating (see Table 2). Even then, while the questions I ultimately received at the time of the exam were very close to the ones I crafted based on committee suggestions, they were not exact replicas.

Table 2

Crafting a comprehensive exam question

My original comps (theory/conceptual framework) question draft	Post-committee-meeting version
Drawing on the existing research literature, trace and discuss the emergence and evolution of feminist theory/criticism. Thinking about your research, how might a feminist theory framework assist and/or hinder the exploration of resilience in higher education?	The concept of resilience has been created and critiqued through the lens of multiple theories and disciplines. Drawing on existing literature, provide an overview of 2-3 major theoretical and/or conceptual framings of resilience. Critically examine and discuss in particular the place of systems theories in understanding and researching resilience. Consider in your response how the varying framings shape the ways in which resilience might be defined in higher education settings.

In terms of a playlist comparison, generating questions on your own is like gathering the songs you want to include, but knowing that none of them are quite right to kick it off. Inspiration has not yet revealed how to best organize the tunes. Then, a friend sends you Yola's cover version of Elton John's "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road," your eyes get bright—a perfect beginning—and ideas for what might follow start to crackle in your brain. Each comprehensive exam question, too, is a way you are choosing to approach your subject (and your papers): enter with a banger.

Who is this for?: Organization and answering the question

"I've started making a tape…in my head…for Laura, full of stuff she'd like, full of stuff that would make her happy. For the first time I can

sort of see how that's done" (Frears, 2000, 1:46:41). Rob Gordon, a character portrayed as rather selfish throughout the film, has finally come to understand that the success of certain things, like making a mixtape for someone, hinges on thinking about *that person,* the audience, more than yourself. The same is true for any academic paper, but especially the comprehensive exams. Audience, after all, is a key aspect of rhetoric: Who are you addressing? What are their concerns? (Dixon, 2019). Comprehensive exams have some of the answers built into the process itself: they are your exams, your audience is concerned with you following the instructions/rules, using proper APA formatting, and answering the questions in an organized way (Comprehensive exams, n.d.). One helpful way to ensure your success with these elements is to ask your supervisor for examples of successful comprehensive exams—the more information about what your audience wants, the better.

Like Rob in *High Fidelity,* I first relied on my own habits, rather than thinking of who I was really writing for. I made outlines based on the organizational techniques I had always used for argument or literary analysis papers—for example, using my critical stance, rather than the question, as a guide. Big mistake. Only when I had fully outlined my impassioned argument did I realize that I had not come close to answering the question. I had made the mixtape for myself. In other words, if the primary concern of my comprehensive exam committee (audience) was whether I answered the question, that should have been my primary concern as well. I should *not* have been concerned with whether my critical stance is mind-blowing, or even original, I should *not* be solely concerned with whether the playlist is full of artists that best reach *me* (Stevie Wonder all the time, anyone?). Comprehensive exams are not about being an expert in the field, but a detail-oriented explorer. That is when I revisited the example comprehensive exam papers my supervisor had sent me, as well as

her all-caps suggestion at the bottom of the email: **ANSWERTHEQUESTION.** I reverse outlined one of the example papers to map out how it was organized; sure enough, the headings and subheadings exactly correlated to parts of the question itself (see Table 3).

Table 3

Organizing the paper itself

QUESTION		
The concept of resilience has been created and critiqued through the lens of multiple theories and disciplines. Drawing on existing literature, provide an overview of 2-3 major theoretical and/or conceptual framings of resilience. Critically examine and discuss in particular the place of systems theories in understanding and researching resilience. Consider in your response how the varying framings shape the ways in which resilience might be defined in higher education settings.		
Parts of the Question	**Headings in Outline**	**Subheadings**
Multiple theories/ disciplines	Intro	N/A
2-3 theoretical and/or conceptual framings	Systems theory overview Psychological theories overview	Systems frameworks of resilience · N/A
In particular systems theories	The place of systems theory in understanding & researching resilience	How systems frameworks of resilience evolved Maintaining systems frameworks of resilience Disturbance(s) to and collapse of systems frameworks How feminist frameworks of resilience can revive systems frameworks

Theories ➜ higher education settings	A feminist exploration of systems frameworks and psychological frameworks of resilience in higher education	The promise of a flourishing future The price of "overcoming"

While the flow of the paper may feel a little clunky using this strategy (even to your committee), remember what matters most to them: answering the question. You can always go back and smooth the transitions later if you have time. Using the question as an organizational template ensures the paper has what your audience wants.

In the world of comprehensive exams, "kicking it off with a killer" is different depending on the recipient of inspiration. Generating interesting, multifaceted questions serves as the "kick it off with a killer" for *you*, the writer, while organization and clarity serves as the "kick it off with a killer" for your audience. If you leave your mind and heart open to that unknown cover version of a favorite tune, you are more likely to find energy in the process; if the playlist is "full of stuff that will make *them* happy," they are far more likely to hear your message.

4. "Then you gotta take it up a notch..." (Frears, 2000, 1:46:30).

You've begun your first paper. It is exciting. The introduction is finished, the first three pages, too, then you find yourself stuck, or bored, or completely lost, unable to make sense of the words you just typed. This could happen at any stage in the process, after one page, three pages, or seven. It may happen more than once. These moments of uncertainty or flatlined energy are perfect opportunities to incorporate Rob Gordon's fourth mixtape rule. In *High Fidelity*, "taking it up a notch" refers to dodging the threat of losing the "killer" vibe by choosing a more intense, more upbeat, or wildly different tune to follow the first. For the comprehensive exam, it can mean any number

of things, but the message is similar: shake up the energy, rather than letting the weight of discomfort drag on.

For the stuck variety of discomfort, taking it up a notch might involve using epigraphs from outside the academic realm to creatively reframe each section, allowing one's brain to approach the ideas from a different angle, whether literary, musical, or philosophical. Some supervisors actively discourage epigraphs in the final product, but using them as a way to pick up the intellectual tempo works wonders. You can always delete them later. For the bored variety, epigraphs can also work, as can more intentionally integrating your critical stance, which makes the process of answering the question feel more personal, less exam-like. "Taking it up a notch," especially when you are languishing in writer's block or following your train of thought into space, is to ask yourself the question: what additions, deletions, or focused points of argument, what vocal qualities or tempos, might *enhance* the vibe that so inspired you in the first place?

5. "You don't wanna blow your wad" (Frears, 2000, 1:46:31)

Listening to six loud, upbeat, breathless songs in a row can be so overwhelming that whatever is amazing or meaningful about those songs simply vanishes. Similarly, it is easy to be swept up by one of your questions, to follow it until all meaning is gone and you have no idea where you are (Yates, 2008). Further, if you spend too much time on one question, you will have less time (and energy) for the second question. In writing the answer to my theory/conceptual question, I constantly got lost in word-play and big concepts, feeling quite brilliant, but actually flying off the rails. At the end of one writing day, I realized that nothing on the last six pages made sense. I tried for a full day to salvage what I had thought was a sound thread of logic. I came dangerously close to "blowing my wad," both energetically and time-wise, before I stopped myself. Ruszkiewicz (2015), in his reference guide for writing any type of

analytical paper, suggests multiple steps for making an outline (in other words, making efficient use of your time), including but not limited to: 1) listing key ideas and merging any that overlap, 2) looking for relationships between the items on the list and organizing them by similarities or contrasts, 3) deciding on a sequence that will best address each part of the question. All of these strategies can help you discover patterns between your ideas, as well as holes in your thinking, all prior to the actual writing process. In my experience, what stopped me from "blowing my wad," in addition to a detailed outline, was some strategic advice from a student a few years further into the program: setting and sticking to a writing schedule (see Table 4).

Table 4

Writing schedule

Week	Writing Schedule
1	Write a solid draft of first paper (Question 1)
2	Write a solid draft of second paper (Question 2)
3	Revise/polish paper 1
4	Revise/polish paper 2

This schedule allows you not to "blow your wad" energetically, as each paper receives the same amount of time, as well as the quality of focus usually unique to the first half of any writing period. It also sets up mini deadlines, which were the only thing between me and spending far too many days on the first paper and leaving fewer days to write the second paper; in other words, "blowing my time-wad." Other students have successfully written *and* revised one paper at a time; so, the writing schedule you create will have everything to do with being aware of your own habits and pitfalls. For example, had I personally continued to try and salvage the unsalvageable, I would have spent far too many days on the first paper and likely not salvaged anything at all, leaving fewer days (and much less patience)

for the second paper. Instead, thanks to the mini deadlines embedded in the suggested schedule (Table 4), I gritted my teeth and deleted all six illogical pages. I started over again from the last place my thoughts made sense: page four. Scary, yes, but a blank slate is better than finding oneself trapped in vortex of YouTube Tiny Desk Concerts, endlessly bookmarking songs to add to a playlist of which you no longer remember the point.

6. "Cool it off a notch..." (Frears, 2000, 1:46:32)

Rob Gordon's "cool it off a notch" step implies a reprieve, a calming stretch in the musical experience. The hope is that the second half of your comprehensive exam writing process will embody this idea (to the best of your ability). If you follow the schedule in Table 4, the latter two weeks of the allotted writing period will be for revisions. Compared to wrestling with your thoughts, revising is lovely, even relaxing. Moving from actively writing into revising can feel like moving from an intense 70s rock song into a slower 70s rock song, followed by a rock-tinged singer-songwriter: Springsteen's "Thunder Road" into Fleetwood Mac's "Dreams" or "Wild Horses" by the Rolling Stones, followed by, say, Bonnie Raitt and John Prine's "Angel from Montgomery." While the revision process does often include a few struggles to clarify main ideas in your critical stance, it primarily revolves around tightening up the organization and clarifying (or even amplifying) the language so your own voice, your own heart, filters through (Sommers, 1980). It is a slower, more methodical rhythm. I printed out both my papers for the revision process. Editing on screen is completely acceptable, but reading away from a screen stimulates different parts of the brain and some studies show deeper contextual analysis from reading paper documents (Walsh, 2016), so it may be worth a try.

Speaking of slow and methodical, use the "cooling it off a notch" stage to introduce *more* self-care, not less. Get some exercise, make a cup of tea, dance around your bedroom for a

moment, take a nap, draw, work on a model airplane, whatever allows your mind to absorb something other than your papers. This is, of course, more difficult for people (most of us) who work outside jobs during comprehensive exam writing. It is helpful to ask for a few days off at least, if not more, but no matter whether that is possible for you or not, intentionally integrating non-academic events or activities into your life while you write and revise is crucial.

Conclusion

Writing comprehensive exams well, like making meaningful mixtapes/playlists, is a long, complex process, some of which can be frustrating, and some of which can be fun (yes, even in the exam writing!) Enjoy the exploration. After all, the purpose of the comprehensive exam process is to not be *the* expert, but rather to thoroughly explore an area of research, and with the help of your supervisor and committee, begin to build your knowledge, identify emerging theories, areas of consensus, and tensions. Eventually, you will have enough information to form critical opinions of the literature and begin to think about your intended research and how it might contribute to the field.

To conclude, threaded through this paper are concepts not directly comparable to Rob's compilation tape steps, but hold the advice as a whole together: intentional choice and communication. The comprehensive exam process can be accessible to everyone, and whether you have a creative metaphor to help guide you or not, you do have resources available. No question or feeling is invalid, even in academia. Prior to your start date, cultivate your relationship with your supervisor and talk with them as much as possible. Ask questions, tell them what you are nervous about, and take their advice. Try to check your ego and/or your embarrassment at the door. You are not supposed to know everything, and one of the most useful resources are people who understands *and* are part of the process. Though you are not permitted to have contact with your supervisor during the exam process, you *can* contact them prior to your exam date, while you're compiling reading lists, for example. If your supervisor is unavailable or inaccessible during the pre-exam process, reach out to another professor who could put you in touch with students who have already passed the exams—their advice is invaluable, as well. Most importantly, breathe. This is one step toward that PhD, a step that can be and has been repeated by many students, but is equally likely to be climbed without a hitch. No matter what, entering the comprehensive exam process means you are on your way!

Literary and Indigenous Métissage: Autobiographical reflections as a first-year Métis PhD graduate student

Madelaine McCracken

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Abstract

In this autobiographical literary and Indigenous métissage reflective paper (Burke & Robinson, 2019; Chambers et al., 2008; Donald, 2009, 2012; Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009), I share a series of three stories I carry as a Métis woman and what I experienced within the first year of my PhD. The three stories will provoke me to weave together my inner child and educational self-discovery and reflectively witness how I have been holding hands with my culture of being Red River Métis in my school-related experiences. I am, therefore, left with the following questions: 1) What does balance mean to me in the first year of my PhD? 2) How have my first-year experiences shaped my identity, both culturally and academically? 3) Why are these stories significant to me and what will they teach me in my continued experiences, now as a PhD candidate and for others on this academic path?

Keywords: *Métis; first-year PhD; graduate student; reflection; Indigenous Métissage; literary Métissage; family; boundaries*

Introduction: The Relationality of You to Me

My name is Madelaine McCracken, I am Red River Métis, and my kinship blood relations are to the Chartrand, Bruce, Larence, and Pangman families of the historical Métis Red River Settlement, of which my relations are still living to this day. They are located in what is known as St. Laurent and Winnipeg, Manitoba. I am surrounded by the love from my family, friends, and academic and professional circles, which is a privilege to express. In this love, I have also held a close relationship with my inner child, a part of me that I continue to care for and nurture. She continues to live her childhood dreams. I acknowledge what she, my family, and my ancestors had to go through for me to be able to honour her.

From the age of eight, I dreamed of becoming a teacher. Not only have I achieved this dream, but I am now a Part-Time Professor at the University of Ottawa and a PhD Candidate researching in the field of education. My research continues to be guided and inspired by Indigenous scholars and their works such as (but not limited to) Battiste (2013), Blackstock (2009, 2012, 2019), Kovach (2021), Archibald (2008), McGuire-Adams (2020), Macdougall (2014, 2016), and Donald (2009, 2012, 2021). I have also been so fortunate to collaborate, learn from, and with, various staff members from the First Nations Child & Family Caring Society. Their continuous care and determination toward upholding and uplifting First Nations children's rights remains a deeply committed mission they have carried since their inception. I also want to offer my gratitude to doctoral supervisor, Nicholas Ng-A-Fook, and mentor, Lisa Howell. Each of these scholars offers the space for me to question what kind of teacher and scholar I am and who I want to become in relation to living and creating future dreams for myself and others.

Now in my reflective practices, I question what stories I should be sharing that might help others the most, especially other Métis and Indigenous graduate students entering these spaces when we each have varying lived experiences. My reflective praxis begins wandering in relation to one's first year within the Faculty of Education doctoral studies program at the University of Ottawa. To do so, I want to address the importance of locating oneself in relation to wandering among and with the methodologies we choose to conduct educational research in relation to the different communities we seek to serve. This is important for me because I am currently at the point of writing my thesis proposal in my doctoral journey. In turn, I want to pinpoint why the selection of methodologies might matter so much to me as a Métis woman and as a researcher.

In this written wandering, I first share why I have chosen to use Indigenous and literary métissage together. I have chosen these two methodologies for reasons that are explained in this work. Then, I retell three autobiographical stories that have impacted my cultural resurgence, academic identity, and my moving along this path, which all happened between September 2021 to August 2022. Further, I am guided by the following reflective questions that will not be answered in order: 1) What does balance mean to me in the first year of my PhD? 2) How have my first-year experiences shaped my identity, both culturally and academically? 3) Why are these stories significant to me and what will they teach me in my continued experiences, now as a PhD candidate and for others on this academic path? After sharing these stories (in whatever form they take), I then weave them together through the use of both métissages to have a better idea of what might be important to share with others as they journey through their experiences as a first-year graduate student. Lastly, I hope to learn more about myself in this work.

Maarsii for joining me.

Methodology of my Self-Wandering: Literary and Indigenous Métissage

Literary métissage and Indigenous métissage find themselves woven naturally together, and thus, I find myself using this place for my self-wandering due to their ability to offer a metaphorical way to weave my stories, and my life at this time, together. Hasebe-Ludt et al. (2009) describe the process of literary métissage as the ability to braid multiple stories together; Chambers et al. (2008) also explain that literary métissage "creates a new text" (p. 142). Through their descriptions, the strands represent "… place and space, memory and history, ancestry and (mixed) race, language and literacy, familiar and strange, with strands of tradition, ambiguity, becoming, (re)creation, and renewal …" (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 9). This methodological life-writing practice holds the capacity to be deeply impactful. However, as a new graduate student, I use caution as I plan to intersect literary and Indigenous métissage together to identify if it is a research practice I may continue to use in my continued graduate work or put to the wayside. I acknowledge this positionality due to how other Métis scholars conceptualize métissage and their concerns in using Indigenous métissage. I will explain this association soon.

Burke and Robinson (2019) carefully note and consider that the term "métissage" does not promote nor safeguard Métis identity because the concept is not Métis-based, which means it was not created by our people. In personal communications, one of my Elders reclaimed the word and its conceptual relevance to Métis identity. My Elder did not infer that métissage meant the mixing of cultures but rather, dedicated its importance to the values of looking at the world and our intersectionalities of culture and connection, always moving and flowing, "si koom di loo."[3] This is the rendering I am comfortable participating in for this reflective work. However, this comfort will be

tested through this wandering methodological life-writing experience.

To further engage, Burke and Robinson (2019) also acknowledge that literary métissage can be practiced by any researcher conducting research that aims to "interweave realities and lived experiences" to find similarities as well as differences between authors' perspectives, stories, and lives (p. 152). I do not want to gatekeep non-Indigenous researchers from participating in this methodology. However, what I am concerned about is if non-Indigenous researchers are acknowledging *why* they have chosen to use this methodological approach and if they have questioned if they should, or should not, continue its use. We can return to Hasebe-Ludt et al.'s (2009) conceptualization of literary métissage as addressed at the beginning of this paper. What comes to the forefront of their rendering is the formation of intersectionalities. In this instance, I am cognizant of questioning whose memories, stories, and perspectives are being prioritized and ensuring voices that have not been listened to due to colonialism, are pushed to the forefront. As such, literary métissage will continue to find itself being used by various researchers, no matter their racialized positionality, ethnicity, and/or (multi)cultural identities. My inherent responsibility in using literary métissage is to honour the complexities of what comes forth from my strands as a Métis educational researcher, how I might action them beyond this work, and for my community.

Moreover, Burke and Robinson (2019) caution us about the colonial roots of the term "métissage," which brings me to address the use of Indigenous métissage. For Donald (2012), the methodology "attend[s] to the complexities of colonial and neo-colonial engagements in a reciprocal manner and find[s] ways to write about those complexities

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[3] Translates to "It's like water" in Michif.

using a language that sparks shifts in historical consciousness and enacts ethical relationality" (p. 544). The methodological practice of Indigenous métissage supports threaded and scaffolded storytelling that provokes the disruption of settler colonialism (Donald, 2009, 2012). Knowing this, I posit that in educational research processes, it is also important to acknowledge Tupper's (2020) rendering of settler colonialism as the underpinning of settler consciousness. She argues that the process of settler consciousness "normalizes and celebrates the settler experience, rendering the past and present experiences of Indigenous peoples either invisible or as distinctly separate from what is worth knowing" (p. 89). As such, if Indigenous métissage is used in educational research processes, it must be with immense responsibility. Further, our shared responsibilities in using the practice are to: (re)tell the truth of Canada's history, respect each other's differences, and acknowledge that we (as Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples) share a history that is concurrent and interrelated to this day (Donald, 2009, 2012; Tupper, 2020). It can also be made clear that literary and Indigenous métissage can work together. However, interweaving these processes requires researchers to honour the ethical responsibilities of their strands and the outcomes of the métissage process. As such, I will carry out this responsibility by weaving three of my own autobiographical stories together as a means to witness what comes forward and how it can also potentially help others, especially Indigenous graduate students. Now that I have situated my methodological wayfinding, the next sections will share three autobiographical strands that impacted my academic and educational experiences.

Reflecting… Always reflecting

This section offers three autobiographical narratives that will thereafter be weaved together through literary and Indigenous métissage. In writing these strands, I let my mind run in ways that are non-guided, allowing it to address tangents and memories that surface and propose advice to support the experiences of current and future PhD graduate students, especially those who are Métis, First Nations, and Inuit.

Listening to my heart and honouring my boundaries

Within the first year of my PhD, it was imperative for me to honour my boundaries to myself and also, to my studies. My boundaries have been intact for quite some time. Moreover, I can pinpoint why my boundaries mean so much to me and it is due to the notion of protection. Protection is an action that is revered in my family as a state of constant being and knowing. Foremost, it primarily represents my mother's love. My mom and I have a close relationship and we talk every day. She has always encouraged me to reach my dreams and ensured that my happiness, alongside my brother's and sister's, was always prioritized, thus initiating our strength and self-confidence. I always felt like I mattered, even as a child. Knowing how much I mattered has allowed me to continuously live with my inner child and appreciate my life and everything it encompasses (Sjöblom et al., 2018). Considering Sjöblom et al.'s (2018) work, I reviewed how other adults perceived their inner children by understanding their experiences as life lessons. The discussion section in the paper provides perspectives on how adults are now treating children in their lives based on their own lived experiences and provides guidance and support for the next generation. Their research offers an opportunity: to be able to reflect upon where we were to know where we are going. As such, whenever my mother says, *"If everyone could be good friends with our 6-year-old selves, we would be kinder to everyone around us."* Knowing what my mother experienced in her childhood, I deeply believe she has always

done her best for her family and this has affected us generationally.

Figure 1

Pictured in the early 1970s, sitting on the couch in the back row from left to right are Sylvia and James McCracken, my grandmother and grandfather. From left to right, they are holding my uncles (James Jr., David,), aunt (Fiona), and mom (Sherry) (own photo).

To provide context upon what my mother has experienced, she would come back from school some days, visibly upset, she would tell my grandmother, Sylvia, that the kids in the class were calling her "*Dirty Indian! Dirty Indian!*" My mom, being as young as she was, did not know why the other kids were being so mean to her. She would ask her mom what these words meant, and in response my grandmother would tell her that she was French. To kindly reflect upon my grandmother's words at this time, she was not too far off from the truth because our immediate family all spoke French. However, we are Métis. My grandmother tried her best to hide my mom from her cultural identity… she wanted to protect my mom.[4]

This protection harnessed by my grandmother is intergenerational as my mom would do anything to protect my brother, sister, and me from any harm, thus affirming how much we

mattered, and how my mom mattered to her family too. My mom grew from this experience, and she knew that it was imperative to let us know about our identity of being Métis at a young age. She affirmed how much we matter and made sure we feel proud to be who we are and to be interwoven in our cultural identities. I am proud to be Métis and this sentiment continues to encourage me to honour my boundaries within my heart, spirit, and mind as I progress in my studies. By honouring where I come from and by reflecting on experiences that I went through in the first year of my PhD, I can determine what my boundaries now mean to me: to honour my relationships.

Figure 2

Pictured in the early 2000s, from left to right are my brother Mitchell, myself, and my sister Meghan (own photo)

I began my PhD studies during the COVID-19 pandemic. I managed to spend meaningful time with my loved ones – safely, and we would share stories, laugh, cry, and learn from one another. Life, *personal life*, cannot be put to the wayside of obtaining a PhD. We must make time for what matters, and to me, it is my relationships with those around me.

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[4] My grandmother was a part of the shamed/hidden generation and my mother is a part of the lost generation. My mother raised my brother, sister, and I to feel proud to be who we are; we are a part of the found generation. There's a fantastic video on the National

Centre of Truth and Reconciliation's YouTube channel, by six-year-old teacher, Rosie Darling, who explains this part of our history in a really great way (17:52 – 21:14: https://youtu.be/kbbb5-Xp1Ys?t=1072).

Respectfully, I am reminded by the words of the late bell hooks, who was a powerful Black American feminist author who broke many barriers within academia and academic institutions. Writing guides her spirit and as much is said in her quotation, "Sometimes I work too hard, such long hours, I feel there is no time to think. I have to stop work to think, to have time to write. Only I can't stop work" (hooks, 1997, p. 121). I resonate with this because I too hold many responsibilities, where at times my mind is clouded with personal pressures and events and I cannot write. Pressure arises in different ways but I know I can speak with my family and friends to alleviate it and they will provide me with guidance. All to say, my heart is my boundary, and my boundary is honouring my heart, and this affords me the precious ability to safeguard my inner child during this academic journey. I hope doing this will create support for the next generation of our family, just like what my grandmother did for my mother, and what my mother did for us.

Space, what is space?

From September 2021 to August 2022, I have been privileged to be a part of various spaces where I have been invited to share my perspectives in my capacity as a graduate student. Upon accepting, I determine the ethical parameters of these presentations, meetings, events, or committees. I then ask myself if my voice should be the one that is shared and if not, whose voice ought to be listened to instead. Such questioning is important to me as it safeguards my ethics of relationality to and with these communities of practice (Donald, 2009, 2012). If these ethics are then respected by the communities I join, I am more comfortable and ready to share my perspectives in these kinds of spaces. Moreover, I will know that I am not being tokenized and that my voice can support addressing settler colonialism and reconciliation-based processes and actions in research, teacher education, and beyond.

I had a meeting with a colleague who is a non-Indigenous researcher in the first semester of my PhD and it changed my perspective on how graduate students, especially Indigenous graduate students, might be seen and listened to by faculty and peers. My colleague asked me questions about the work that they were doing which focused on an Indigenous-derived ontology in education research, and if they should collaborate with an Indigenous academic who studies this form of ontology to ensure they are writing their proposed work in a good way. I responded by noting that if they do intend to publish their paper as a shared work, they should in fact work alongside an Indigenous academic throughout the research process, and further, consider that this person should be the lead author of the work.

I recognize the importance of settler-researchers who are located in what is known as Canada, wanting to ensure they are participating and doing work that respectfully represents the perspectives of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis. However, I am uncertain if non-Indigenous researchers truly understand how much First Nations, Inuit, and Métis academics ought to not only be invited to research, presentations, and paper collaborations but instead, should be the ones leading these kinds of projects. As reminded by Tuck and Yang (2014), settler-researchers cannot continue "allow[ing] their work to serve as yet another advertisement for power" (p. 244). Such leadership, by Indigenous researchers in particular, can combat settler colonialism that still persists in academic spaces. Further, this reflection leads me to admit that if I am able to ensure that the spaces I decide to fulfill are the ones I am supposed to be in, then settler-researchers ought to be doing this reflective practice as well and step down from roles when it is right and appropriate to be holding them. As a note for Indigenous graduate students, it is imperative to not overextend yourself if the spaces you enter are non-ethical or not worth your time and energy; unjoin them or just say no.

I led a presentation at the Education Graduate Students of Colour's Fall Institute on October 27, 2021. The presentation was entitled, *The Relationality of Community Voices and Creating a Safe Space in the Classroom and Beyond*. In the presentation, I addressed the imperative of what a "safe space" actually looks like, and questioned, who is a safe space actually for and whom it benefits? Instead, we should be looking toward ethical spaces (Cheechoo, 2020; Donald, 2009, 2012). The key difference between an ethical space and a safe space are preventative measures made to protect those who are Black, Indigenous, a part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, or who hold a disability. These preventative measures outline how racist, homophobic, discriminative, ableist or otherwise disrespectful treatment will be managed. As such, for future Indigenous first-year graduate students who might read this métissage, please know that non-Indigenous professors do hold the capacity to create and function well within ethical spaces. However, there are also those who do not... As such, you need to ensure you are conducting/creating your own ethical screening process that ultimately honours your boundaries and ethical space.

Assignments and making them personal

My favourite part about being a graduate student, even now, are the mornings I get to spend at home with my coffee in my Yoda coffee mug with my mustard blanket wrapped around me, my dog, Eddie, cuddled on my lap, and my computer open to Microsoft Word - prepared for a day full of writing. For the assignments I wrote during my first year, I was able to cater them toward my research goals and interests, especially in preparation for my Comprehensive Exam to become a PhD Candidate. My papers primarily surrounded discussing my family, my culture, and my ongoing work toward addressing settler colonialism and reconciliation education. What I appreciated most, was that each of my professors helped me to better articulate my

voice and guided my learning, especially in relation to queer pedagogy, curriculum development, ontology, methodology, and addressing contemporary issues that are prevalent in educational systems and spaces. Each professor I had in my first year was completely dedicated to teaching in good ways; ways where I knew I could feel safe expressing myself.

For one paper in particular, I was able to reflect upon my family and our experiences of intergenerational trauma due to colonialism and other factors. I specifically discussed my mom and expressed how much she matters, and further, how much she mattered as a child. I was delighted as I was able to fly to Winnipeg, Manitoba, to visit my mom mid-semester, and while I did this, I shared the paper that reflected upon these aspects, with her. Before I shared this work with her, I took my partner to the St. Norbert Farmers' Market (to the community in Winnipeg where I grew up) and picked out a sunflower to give to my mom. As we returned, we sat down, I gave my mom the sunflower and then, I showed her my laptop to review the paper I wrote. She cried due to how much the paper meant to her; we cried together.

As a Métis graduate student and as a PhD Candidate, my whole spirit goes into my writing, research, presentations, and other academic work. I am *always* bringing who I am into each and every single aspect of the work I am doing, and it is exhausting. Although it is inexcusably exhausting, it has also been the most meaningful, healing, and nourishing experience in my life thus far. My mom recently told me, "*You are making our whole family proud of who we are and there was a long period of time where we couldn't be...*" First-year Indigenous graduate students, in this reflection I am speaking directly to you... Obtaining your PhD is not only for your benefit, but it is for the benefit of your family, your friends, and your community. As a community, we are all here to support you.

Figure 3

Painted is a sunflower upon a green background. Sunflowers represent happiness to the McCracken family. The artist is the author of this paper, Madelaine McCracken

Discussion

I did not know the path this paper would take when I first started to write it. However, I am proud of the autobiographical practice this paper has afforded me. To weave the strands of this Indigenous and literary métissage together, it is clear the strands shared all interconnect with my family and my community. I would not be the researcher that I am if it were not for their constant love and support. As such, I can determine that being a Métis graduate student, and now PhD Candidate, it is heart and community-based work.

For my first strand, it is evident that honouring my boundaries is imperative; it is for holistic protection, and this process will take time to nurture and honour. The experience of reflecting upon this form of protection is significant to my continued experiences as a PhD Candidate because I am still telling myself that it is important to take time as needed and that it is all right to say no to academic projects, events, presentations, and overall experiences, especially if they do not nourish my heart, body, mind, and spirit. Further, the work I hope to accomplish within my PhD and within the field of education is also for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis community members who were not able to live their dreams as children. For my second strand, I delve into considerations of ethical spaces and how they can function in good ways; ways that affirm Indigenous graduate students in particular. I am still discerning my comfortabilities in relation to my continued research and work as a PhD Candidate. With this, it is crucial to safeguard our spaces and ensure that they are ethically aligned with who we are and the work we end up conducting. It acts as a community-based responsibility, and I know in my heart, those who are a part of my community are sincerely here to support me in good ways, just as much as I am also there for them. For my final strand, it was determined that even the paper that I had written for my classes impacted my community directly. This impact is made apparent because I shared my work with my community and family. There is beauty in being able to share your work with others, and it will continue to be a practice I do moving forward. My community, in particular, wants to know what I write. As such, I will continue to share my work with others who might ask to read it too.

In relation to the use of the methodologies of literary and Indigenous métissage, I contend that the way it was used in this paper is a practice I am comfortable using moving forward but when it is appropriate to do so. I would intend to use these methodologies together to amplify and support reflective experiences from Indigenous, and specifically, Métis researchers as an act of reclaiming. Our stories ought to be (re)told, and further, words, like "métissage," need to be reclaimed if they are going to be used ongoingly in research practices. However, it is an expectation that my non-Indigenous counterparts just use literary métissage (or use another methodology altogether). This connects to taking a step back in spaces, especially in academic ones, when it is needed to do so. As such, please do not engage in Indigenous métissage and leave this

methodology with Métis and Indigenous educational researchers to conduct and reclaim/reconfigure for our own community-based work.

Conclusion

My methodological renderings in this work bring to light just how much family matters to me; this is how I locate myself in my research. They are the backbone and the heart of my PhD experience. They help me feel stronger and more determined to engage in research that amplifies our stories and further, how the field of educational research can benefit from listening to our voices, especially in relation to addressing settler colonialism and responding to reconciliation in Canada. We get to honour our inner children this way. For kinship reading this work, please know that you are not alone as you enter these spaces. Further, you are in control of your boundaries; honour them and your inner child, safeguard them, and know that your community supports you.

The PhD journey from a non-traditional mature age perspective

Meg Garrard

Meg is a third-year candidate studying educational leadership at the University of Ottawa. She has a long career in schools and educational leadership positions. She graduated with an M. A. in educational leadership and management from Royal Roads University when she was in her early 40s and returned to graduate school once again at age 50 to undertake her PhD. Her research interests are focused on educational leadership, ethical decision-making, and school choice. She lives in the Gatineau Hills with her husband, two teenagers, and two dogs and loves to adventure in the outdoors.

Abstract

Undertaking PhD studies as a mature student is considered non-traditional. In this article, the author explains why for her, starting her PhD at age 50 was the right choice. Central themes include an exploration of motivations, the importance of timing, how skills developed though a previous career are assets, and the advantages of knowing yourself better as you get older. Just as an older PhD student may be considered non-traditional, so is the idea of undertaking the PhD as a personal challenge. While not without some challenges, older PhD students have many reasons to be successful, enjoy the process, and contribute to the wider education community. This article explains some of them through the lens of an experienced career professional in the field of education.

Keywords: *Mature student, process, motivation, timing, non-traditional, success, challenges*

Introduction

Starting a PhD at age 50 can be a rewarding and successful experience. I was a dedicated professional in the field of education and my job was very stressful but intensely satisfying. The demands were relentless, but I remained highly effective. That is, until the pandemic pushed me over the proverbial edge and forced me to do some hard reflecting. I became one of those people you read about in the media who left their profession to start something new; I returned to school in a new role. For me, starting my PhD at a non-traditional mature age was cause for pause. The literature defines me as a 'mature student' in that I am over the age of thirty-five (Baptista, 2014; Stehlik, 2011). However, who I was at thirty-five is vastly different from who I am at fifty. Some studies have tried to capture this difference by referring to 'non-traditional age' (Hiltz-Hymes et al., 2015) or even 'non-traditional mature-age' (Templeton, 2021) students. I believe this outright differentiation between age thirty-five and fifty is essential. While there are certainly days when I question my decision to embark on this journey, this piece shares why I have concluded that starting a PhD as a non-traditional mature-aged student has made the journey more feasible and rewarding than it would have been when I was younger. I am not alone in feeling this way; according to Hiltz-Hymes et al. (2015) satisfaction among mature-aged education PhD students is rated at 79%. Yet, "why?" remains an uncomfortably common question I receive. Nobody can fathom why I would undertake a PhD at this point in my career when it is clearly not needed. Let me explain the answer.

Motivation

Motivation for pursuing graduate studies varies with age and stage of life (Fung et al., 2017). When I was in my 30s, I had no drive to pursue graduate school. It was not required for my desired career progression but most importantly, I was not interested in undertaking such a commitment. It wasn't until later that I had deeper questions and a desire to take advantage of what graduate studies had to offer. Part of the reason that the "why?" question has been so hard to answer is that there is not a traditional goal for me in this process of pursuing PhD studies. I have no specific labour market goals that require this level of education. Earning a PhD is a process that involves challenge, reflection, resilience, and personal growth. My goal is this process itself. I am not convinced that by completing my PhD any new doors will open for me or that it will translate to a higher salary or position. Perhaps they will, but it's not a priority for me. I am not alone in this, as Stehlik's (2011) study of Australian education PhD students indicated only 50% of the mid-career respondents identified career advancement as a motivator. Templeton (2021) explains this by stating "Goal achievement, or the need to achieve, is considered an intrinsic motivator for some mature students as a personal rather than a professional goal" (p. 51). In my experience, this is not widely understood by professors, many of whom assume that a future in academia is the pathway of choice. My success is self-defined. In many respects, that makes this a relatively stress-free endeavour. I also feel extremely privileged to be able to pursue my studies in this way. After decades of putting the needs of others first (a demanding career and a young family), I am finally doing something for myself. I am not engaging in my studies to launch a career, but rather to reflect on one.

Figure 1

Julianne Burgess graduated from Brock University's PhD in Educational Studies in 2022 at the age of 64 (Landman, 2022). Printed with permission of J. Burgess.

The importance of timing

Timing is critical. When a group of sixteen mid-career education PhD students were asked in a survey why they had undertaken doctoral studies at this stage of their career, all except one responded that 'the time was right' (Stehlik, 2011). The same is true for me. Family commitments have shifted. I no longer have babies and toddlers – my teenagers require a different kind of attention. I have had the benefit of a career that resulted in some degree of financial stability. I am no longer being stretched in every direction and on the brink of collapse like I was in my 30s. I now have the capacity to think differently and to fully dive into something new. I am also ready to tackle ideas and questions that would not have occurred to me when I was younger. My advanced career and stability were the catalyst for undertaking my studies. I didn't have the time, the questions, or the capacity to undertake my PhD any earlier. Skakni (2018) refers to the PhD process as a personal challenge or 'quest'. As a believer in lifelong learning, the skills and knowledge acquired through this journey are invaluable.

Career skills

My skills and experience stemming from my prior career are an asset. I am fortunate that I have consistently felt validated in this regard. My thesis supervisor keeps reminding me that I am already an expert in my topic. I have a deep background in my topic, a strong network of people working in my area of study, and decades of practical experience and training directly related to my research. I don't always have to start from scratch to get answers. Through my career and other life experiences, I have learned to manage stress, relate to colleagues, answer to supervisors or committee members, and advocate for my own needs when necessary. I am already comfortable navigating complex systems and have developed patience when dealing with large organizations (like a university). I have a sense of when it is worth agitating or pressing an issue and when it is not. I can lean on what I have gained through my career to enhance my experiences in my PhD journey. For mid-career learners, "Lived experiences, including theoretical and practical, provide the ontology or knowledge gathered to address the problem or situation, the epistemology or source of the information, and the axiology of believability the learner attributes to the informational source" (Templeton, 2021, p. 49). In this way, my prior knowledge shapes solutions to problems I encounter.

Knowing myself

I know myself better now than I did twenty years ago. I have attained a greater readiness to learn and to determine future learning. While this may seem obvious, I understand my strengths and weaknesses so that I can leverage my efforts where they are most needed. I have more confidence to admit what I don't know. But I also have the confidence to stand my ground about things that I do know. Managing stress is something my prior career taught me to do very well. By contrast, first year PhD studies seemed like smooth sailing. I no longer get ruffled about 'the system' or 'the game' that is the university experience. I have enough experience to at least partly understand why things get bogged down. I know what I am good at and where I should seek support. I know how long it takes me to

get things done, and when I do my best work. I also know when I need a break and what kind of a break I should take. These are things I have learned over time and had not internalized earlier in my career with the same effectiveness as I do now. Knowing myself has continued to develop over time and has been an important part of my positive experience as a mature-age PhD student.

Challenges and special considerations

While my PhD journey has been a positive one so far, it is not without some challenges and things I wish were different. Other non-traditional mature-age students who are beginning their journey might want to consider some of these challenges and common pitfalls. According to Kiley (2017), the most common reasons for lack of success among the Australian mature-age education PhD candidates were the perception that they already knew the answers, an over-reliance on practice over research, and feelings of constraint and of being disillusioned that their work might become theoretical rather than practical. Baptista (2014) cites struggles with a dual identity reflected in academic and professional awareness as another potential challenge. Defining oneself as both a researcher and an educator at the same time can create a clash due to the co-existence of roles. Being an academic in the field of education may sometimes feel in conflict with being an educator or an academic administrator. Furthermore, it is common among university faculty to view mentorship of PhD students as synonymous with training future academics. For many non-traditional mature-aged students, this is not the aspiration. My experience is that the academic community seems to lack exposure to my non-normative path of doing a PhD to nurture my own authenticity. Thus, my path is met by more of a sense of curiosity than respect and understanding. It is important to work with a supervisor who understands your goals and I

am grateful for the understanding and support I get from mine.

Universities are full of bureaucracies that inherently result in slow processes and procedures, endless forms, and consistent feelings of being somewhat irrelevant to the giant machine. This can be particularly challenging if your career experience has left you accustomed to having an influence and the ability to create change. I would suggest leaving those expectations behind and, instead, embracing being new at something, accepting that you have a lot to learn, and trusting that those around you have your best interest in mind. While it may not be true all the time, it is true enough of the time. 'The system' is far from perfect, and I had to make a conscious decision not to fight it; instead, anecdotes from my bureaucratic encounters have become a common part of our family dinner-time humour. Finally, many people told me about the importance of a good fit with your supervisor. And, just like all the people who told me what it would be like to have kids, I am reminded that everything they said was true, but I didn't fully understand how true, or what it would really be like until I was living it.

In conclusion, for me, undertaking PhD studies in my 50s has been the right choice. I feel it has given me advantages and that my experience of the process is richer due to my stage of life. Indeed, it is the process that I seek. I challenge myself, discover new things, and begin to answer deep and important questions that have developed over the course of my career. Perhaps it is because of my age that I have lost a sense of idealism that my work will change the world. I have a humbler view of what I can learn and contribute. I am excited to continue to share my learning at conferences, in my writing, within my professional networks, in the classroom, and in the workplace.

Choosing an academic pathway in later life: A steeper incline?

Paul McGuire

Paul McGuire is a retired educator. He lives in Ottawa with his wonderful partner, Heather. Paul and Heather have three grown-up kids - Liam, Mairi and Colleen and one lovely new grandchild - Frankie, named after Paul's dad, Frank McGuire. When not training, climbing, reading or writing, Paul puts on a regular radio show with his buddy Bob Kennedy - Old Fellas New Music - featuring new music no older than 2016.

Abstract

From my perspective as a retired principal, these are personal reflections on the PhD experience. Throughout, I note the transition from a career in public education to life in the academy. The focus is on some of the challenges and many of the joys of academic life - learning to adapt to an academic culture, learning to write in an academic style, and learning to become part of a new community. The article concludes with advice for one considering a new adventure - enjoy the ride, learn to take criticism, and keep an open mind.

Keywords: *Retirement, new learning, arrogance, PhD program, doctorate degree, APA*

Introduction

I am nearing the end of my second year of the PhD program in education at the University of Ottawa. After a long and interesting career in public education, I retired six years ago as an elementary school principal. I am also in the final stages of preparation for climbing Mount Kilimanjaro for the second time. In some ways, the academic journey reminds me of climbing a very big mountain. The growing pains of learning a new academic culture have been significant - not something I was expecting in my mid-sixties. As an elementary school principal, I understood the work culture of public education. I trained first as a high school department head, followed by five hectic years as an elementary vice-principal, finally becoming a principal of various elementary schools. Some of the situations I dealt with are unique to this profession – the death of a child's parent, the suicide of a student, a medical crisis involving a student whose heart stopped in the hallway, students with addiction issues, physically violent students, lockdowns, so many lockdowns – my training helped me to respond in a way that kept people safe and allowed the learning day to continue. Now, no longer living in that crazy comfort zone, I struggle to figure out a new professional identity. In this short reflective piece, I examine my experience of the culture of the academy, of overcoming some of my obstacles to learning in this environment, and of the process of acclimatizing to academic life. Each day on the mountain, climbers encounter new climatic zones as the air they breathe slowly thins out. In the academy, there are levels of learning that slowly unfold, each bringing new challenges.

Reflecting on new learning

Starting a PhD in retirement is a topic that may warrant more study. The motivations for entering graduate work are different for the retiree than for younger candidates. As Stehlik (2011) explains, older students who enter the academy do so for reasons that appear "more philanthropic than pragmatic, more inspirational than aspirational, and more holistic than strategic" (p. 67). Older students are more likely to state that their motivation for starting a PhD involves personal development and the opportunity to reflect on learnings gathered throughout a previous career (Stehlik, 2011). In my case, the PhD path started during the COVID-19 pandemic. I had previously taught a few courses in the Faculty of Education to teacher candidates, gradually getting a sense that beginning a new academic climb might be the right thing to take on. Having taught high school history early in my career, I wanted to learn more about what methods teachers could use to develop critical or historical thinking with their students.

The work on historical thinking was entirely new to me and I quickly became caught up in its potential to effectively engage students. Historical thinking is a very well-researched approach to teaching history. It focuses on a skills-based methodology and challenges students to adopt an inquiry stance like how the professional historian works. Beginning in the early 2000's researchers including Wineburg (2001, 2018), Seixas and Morton (2013), Bain (2005), and Barton and Levstik (2004) began to flesh out and develop teaching methodologies based on historical thinking concepts. How this theory translates into everyday practice needs to be investigated in more depth.

In the first year of my PhD, I worked with a small group of colleagues taking the same compulsory graduate-level classes. Every week, we followed a similar schedule – three hours of epistemology and, later in the year, one evening class on qualitative methodology and another on contemporary issues in education. We joined a WhatsApp group that we still use to keep in touch. We lived (and continue to live) online; to this day, it is always

a shock when we meet in person. We also learned to rely on each other - for me, most of what I understand about academic writing continues to come from my classmates.

A new culture, a new climb

The academic world opened a new culture for me. What one researches, learns, writes, and eventually publishes counts. What I had been doing for 31 years really did not prepare me for this. There was no smooth transition. I am still exploring how my years of experience as an educator and administrator influence my transformation into a researcher. To be a researcher, the exploration of new knowledge is what is important. While my public school years gave me a critical perspective on what has been going on in education, now learning and research place greater emphasis on the new and unexplored.

Most notably, the style of writing is very different. It has taken me a long time to understand the components of academic writing. As I struggle through drafts that may become one of my comprehensive exam essays, it does become easier to understand that academic writing is a new process. A principal's writing needs to be clear and direct. The point is to communicate important information in a way that cannot be misinterpreted – the boy kicked the other boy in the knee, then the second boy fell to the ground and started to cry. Academic writing is more of a conversation. The writer must reference their sources; ideas must connect and flow to show coherence. To get better at this, I rely on my fellow students, my supervisor, and my partner. My writing is going through multiple iterations, and it is humbling to understand the time some of my fellow students are taking to make this reflection more of an academic piece.

I have taken something else from this experience. In 2019, before the PhD, I taught a history methodology course to second-year teacher candidates. Looking back at the experience, it is clear I had a great deal to learn. When teaching the same course this past winter, nothing remained from my earlier syllabus. As I learn to become an academic, my understanding of education has changed and shifted my perspective on teaching and, in turn, how I relate to teacher candidates. I enjoyed that last semester; very little of this 'new course' could have been delivered without the reading, discussing, and writing done over the past two years. For example, I now understand that a certain grounding in educational theory is essential background for teacher candidates. Beyond introducing them to the curriculum, they need to appreciate why different methodologies of instruction are more effective than others. Unlike the course's first iteration, students were provided with weekly readings to better understand the important ideas and research that have circulated over the past 20 years.

A reflective process

As Stehlik (2011) writes, this is me going through a reflective process; and as I reflect, I realize there is a certain arrogance that comes with being a retired educator. Authority and influence in the school community come from years of acquired practical experience. In that context, this is what counts – the gravitas you can exercise in your school. What impact can you have on your students, their parents, and the wider community? How can you balance the everyday frenetic pace of the school and the importance of maintaining a steady presence for those with whom you work? My arrogance comes from the realization that I was able to successfully manage this balancing act. I possessed a certain amount of power and influence and used this to sustain a positive and vibrant school community. It came from reaching a position where one is a community leader, someone with the potential to make a difference.

Maybe arrogance is not the right word; however, it is difficult to put aside so many years of experience working with children,

their families, and fellow staff members and the recognition that follows. However, the academic world is different, and there is no clear way to translate these experiences into something significant in academia. This is starting over again - I scramble to learn about APA citation, new writing conventions, various methodologies for conducting academic research, and how to find opportunities to present work to my peers and the wider academic community.

I hope these reflections will be helpful for others who are thinking about a second career. I love the work I am doing, thinking about my research and my writing every day. I am surprised that I feel so passionate about this work. This is not something that was expected. In my previous career, there was little time for reflection. New ideas filtered down from senior levels, contemplation and wondering could be seen as career-limiting. What I am doing now brings me back to my time as an undergraduate history student. I loved to live in the world of ideas; it was an adventure to conduct new research, and now the journey is taken up again.

The PhD program has given me a community. I did not realize how much I would value this connection and that something essential was missing from my life. Most of these people I had never met in person; some live thousands of miles away. Still, when I reach out to them for help (especially with my writing), they are right there. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have had an unusual experience. We remain a virtual cohort, but maybe this has made for a stronger community. It is a wonderful thing to be part of a creative community, especially after retiring.

Becoming part of an institution

When you retire, it is easy to think that significant learning is over or that new experiences are left behind. This is not the case. Something I recognize from my experience is being part of an institution. How does anyone write in an upbeat manner about being part of an institution? Joining academia is new; however, it follows 31 years in public education and six years as a national board member in a Catholic organization. Not surprisingly, all institutions share similar characteristics. They all have a very strong instinct for self-preservation. Nothing is inherently wrong with this; one needs to find ways to adapt without becoming overwhelmed. A university is a big organization with so many moving parts. As a graduate student, I am part of this organization, but certainly on its lowest rungs. The professors we work with have been writing and researching, sometimes for decades. They have reputations for being leaders in their fields. I have struggled to come to terms with this. It is hard sometimes to know where one fits in. Even after a long career, this can take a toll on your self-esteem. Losing the arrogance of a career educator takes time. However, now it is important to understand that I am part of this culture and after two years of hard work, I deserve to be here.

My steps up the mountain

For me, it is best just to immerse myself in the climb. It feels good to take new risks. Like the mountain, the atmosphere here is different, and I am still acclimating to it. Learning to become a researcher is a challenging task. There are no classes that teach this, and students who prosper must find a way to work independently, somehow finding assurances that they are moving in the right direction. What I know now is that the best resources I have are my fellow students - there is so much wisdom and experience here. There is real compassion, more than I would have thought possible.

Figure 1

Author's view of the sunrise from the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro, 2017

I must develop my unique academic pathway and reach out and develop new professional relationships. The unique relationship with my advisor is essential as we are in an extended learning relationship. This is part of my new path. As a principal in small elementary schools, I was used to working by myself; I was expected to rely on my resources. Working with other principals was rarely done. Here, I work on developing a positive relationship that will be of mutual benefit. Regularly, I will be able to meet with my supervisor who has agreed to give their time to train me as a researcher. I may not be the easiest student, and I am sorry for that, but what an intense way to learn! There will be highs and lows over the next three to four (or more) years. Right now, I am loving the opportunity to work with teacher candidates and my fellow PhD students. I continue to work on my research in hopes of getting past the daunting comprehensive exam stage. Upon reflection, this is all good. I chose this path and I plan to stick with it. As I write (and edit!) this piece, I am thinking about my wonderful colleagues, four of whom have stepped up to help me with my writing. Writing and climbing are similar challenges; new pathways can be a struggle, but this is where the learning takes place.

Concluding Thoughts

I have met some bright, kind people over the past two years. If I were not in this program, I would not know any of them and that would be a loss. This is my new community, a great, unexpected gift. As I start my third year, I think I can offer some advice: *First*, don't rely too heavily on your prior experiences. You are starting something unique and will do your best if you enter all this with a completely open mind. *Second,* do not take criticism personally. I have had a hard time with this, probably due to my ego, again. Try not to let it bother you. Academics do this to each other all the time and it is part of the culture. While it might seem harsh, they experience the same thing every time they submit something for publication. *Last*, try to enjoy the experience. When you look back at all the work you are doing, it is important to acknowledge that you are attempting something difficult and worthwhile. Why not enjoy the climb?

Navigating through doctoral studies in difficult times

Adolf Diange Eboa

Diange is a first-generation Canadian citizen, with teaching experiences from Cameroon, South Korea, and Canada (Ontario and Nunavut). I hold a Bachelor's degree in Biochemistry, a master's in international studies (NGOs/IGOs), a master's in biotechnology, a bachelor's, and a master's degree in education, and am currently a Doctor of Philosophy of Education candidate. I am licenced as a principal in Nunavut and have seven Ontario College of Teachers additional qualifications. Under the supervision of Prof Carole Sénéchal, my research interest is in multicultural science education (MSE).

Abstract

Immigrating and succeeding in Canada requires strategic planning, self-determination, and acceptance of change. These require courage, resilience and adaptability to academics, professions, and family lives. Adaptations to life's circumstances or overcoming challenges depend on the people we are acquainted with. My experiences show that challenges constantly intrude on one's dreams and purposes and may hinder success. Each time one is opportune to advance, challenges assert themselves on us. We are all born with tremendous and unique abilities, and despite challenges, we can overcome any such with a little more effort. My experiences and challenges have helped build personal tenacity and perseverance to hunt my destiny and purpose. This discussion will serve as an encouragement and motivation for others facing similar circumstances. When we immigrate with foreign credentials, it is essential to realign them to Canadian academic standards for career and professional adaptations. I have encountered many immigrants in Canada who are highly qualified, resulting in a competitive job market. Re-learning or realigning oneself to the Canadian educational system through unlearning and learning new knowledge remains the fastest means of adaptation. Joining the teaching profession and pursuing doctoral studies can be an advantageous and fast means for sustainable adaptation.

Keywords: *Education, doctoral studies, multiculturalism, science education, teaching, resilience, adaptability, tenacity, diversity, inclusion*

Introduction

In this reflective piece, I will outline my journey as an immigrant to Canada whose goal was to build a career in education. I will discuss the challenges I overcame, including settling my family, looking for jobs that sustained my family, and returning to academia, as well as motivating factors that positively impacted my experience. Every immigrant's journey is different, but I hope many who have similar challenges could find this reflection helpful. There exist twists and turns that may be unique to many. These twists may not be uncommon from my experience, but what I found useful was learning from the knowledge of volunteers and community elders with similar experiences to help guide my decisions. Canada has many, what I term, "destiny helpers," willing to provide help. In addition to adapting to life's circumstances or challenges, the people we get acquainted with are also essential to success. My experiences outlined below have many twists, but my general success has been shaped by encountering the right people at the right time in my life's journey.

My journey begins as a first-generation immigrant to Canada. I am a teacher by profession with experience from Cameroon, South Korea, and Canada. I hold teaching licenses across three provinces in Canada, specifically in Ontario, Alberta, and Nunavut. I entered teaching with a bachelor's degree in sciences from the Department of Biochemistry (B.Sc.), a Master of Arts (M.A) in international studies, and a Master of Sciences (M.Sc.) in Biological Engineering. I started my teaching profession in the private sector, including the Jamea Memorial College, Kumba City College, and the Divine Comprehensive College, all in the Southwest region of the Republic of Cameroon. These experiences served as a pathway to immigrate to Canada as a qualified secondary school teacher. However, despite my academic and professional expertise, fitting into Canadian society as a teacher requires licensing from an accrediting body, which is most easily done via the completion of a Canadian Bachelor of Education degree. This served as the first and most significant challenge to overcome. Since teaching using a B. Sc in Biochemistry in private schools while in Cameroon does not equate to formal training provided within a B.Ed., there was a need to get pedagogic training despite my prior experiences. I needed to reflect further on my next steps. To raise some income for these additional studies, I used all my degrees to apply to hundreds of jobs outside of teaching. Regardless of my persistence, I consistently received responses claiming I was overqualified or had no Canadian experience, making the job hunt elusive. I later applied to volunteer with the Ministry of Agri-Food and Agriculture, for the Government of Canada in Ottawa. For some months, I volunteered under an agricultural research scientist, using my science experience to gain some experience. At the same time, having a family to feed, I became a chef at a full-service restaurant. These added to my experience in Canada, such as acquiring additional customer service skills needed to serve people at the restaurant, which has contributed to my success today. From this, I took the fact that life is not a constant but requires continuous change and adaptation. Similar types of challenges have changed the trajectory of many immigrants pursuing their life goals and purposes in Canada.

In one of my professional turning points, I was admitted to Heritage College, Gatineau, Canada, to pursue nursing. After being admitted, I realized this career trajectory would not meet my interests and life goals so I made a second career change to Microsoft Network and Security Administration (MNSA). However, after completing the coursework and heading to a placement as a condition for completing the MNSA diploma, I realized that this also wasn't for me.

Making a final, circular, career change, I transitioned back to the teaching profession, accepting the challenge to unlearn and learn

new knowledge about the educational system in Canada, beginning with a bachelor's in education (B.Ed.) from the University of Ottawa. I proceeded with my first teaching job with the Blyth Academy, a private high school. Later on, after acquiring additional qualifications for French as a Second Language, I worked with the Ottawa Carleton District School Board (OCDSB), specifically at Bell High School. At the end of the 2018 school year, I was hired for a math and science position with the Department of Education under the Government of Nunavut. There, I experienced increased fulfillment, especially when engaging with teaching using culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), a pedagogic approach that incorporates students' sociocultural and linguistic experiences (Tilsen et al., 2021). This strategy also recognizes students' diversity, background, languages, family structures and social or cultural identities (Ladson-Billings, 2013). CRP aligns with the Medicine Wheel, a holistic learning strategy that fosters students' physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being (Mashford-Pringle & Shawanda, 2023).

Seeking to understand deeper strategies for teaching and learning, I decided that I needed to further enroll in a master's in education (M.Ed.) program, which finally led to a Doctor of Philosophy of Education, all at the University of Ottawa. Concurrently, I have found great fulfilment in teaching and have inspired and encouraged many students from multicultural backgrounds graduating from high school into different programs across Canadian universities, including but not limited to sciences, medicine, teaching, engineering, and nursing. Most of these students come from Nunavut either as Indigenous students, that is, born in the region, or having lived there throughout their elementary and secondary studies. I feel happy to have had some impact in building up some of these communities. Specifically, supporting the journey of graduating students from Indigenous communities into high-profile universities

within Canada motivated me to acquire more skills and knowledge. To this end, I completed a Graduate Certificate of Educational Leadership in Nunavut (CELN) from the University of Prince Edward Island, which led to a certificate of eligibility to act as a school principal. To add, so far, I am proud of the additional qualifications I have since gained in Intermediate/Senior in Biology and Chemistry, Junior Qualifications, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies (FNMI), French as a Second Language (FSL) teacher, Special Education Part 1 and Part 2, and Mathematics.

If I had ignored my inner voice, I would have missed much of the value within me. We are all born for a purpose and need to accomplish these purposes before we leave this world. As Dr. Myles Monroe (2008) would say, we must find our purpose and use our potential to accomplish it. He will always emphasize the effective use of time to maximize our potential and to accomplish our life's purpose. To him, a person who dies without accomplishing their purpose or impacting their generations with their gifts has robbed the potential of the next generations. He frequently noted that the graveyard is full of buried treasures and desires and that we should not be the type of person to carry our treasures to the grave. I am constantly reminded of this as a wake-up call to motivate and inspire others on their journeys. I advise others that challenges and excuses should never hinder our potential.

Family motivation

I will become the first in my family, village, and neighbouring communities to obtain a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD). Is this not awesome? For some of you, the case may differ because you might be a family with many academic successes. However, if you are like me, why not challenge yourself to make a difference? Why don't you become the first to lead in building a new chain of academic success? I am an academic liberator to my family and generation and am held to a promise for my late parents, who served as teachers, to continue with their

legacies. This burning desire has become a life purpose and mission, which, if not completed, will lead to a life of regrets. My challenge is to continue their vision and hope to a higher level, and pursuing a doctorate is a continuity of this family vision that will extend to future generations. That is the standard we must set as family goals towards academic journeys. I have decided to shine the light as an example in my family and communities. At age 19, my late father told me he would love for me to live in Canada, where I might maximize my potential. These words remain fresh and new in my spirit and are a push to my greatness. I recall my dad citing Nelson Mandela with the words, "Education is the weapon to change one's life." The dream of becoming the first doctoral holder in my community is becoming a reality, specifically after passing my doctoral comprehensive exams and becoming a doctorate candidate.

Figure 1

An original drawing by the author of a lion representing confidence, courage, resilience, adaptability, tenacity, perseverance, diversity, and inclusion

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Throughout this journey, I keep reflecting on my dreams and goals to break through and obtain a doctorate, opening the doors for many in the community, specifically to the village of Matondo 2 Mbonge, Cameroon. I sincerely appreciate my late parents' efforts in my journey and may their souls rest in peace.

Positionality

Conveying a brief overview of my lived experience and my purpose in writing this piece comes from wanting to articulate challenges that relate to many. I hope this account will resonate and be helpful for anyone struggling with an academic decision or professional career progression. In the rest of this piece, I will further summarize my experiences framing them with how the various challenges I have encountered have provided valuable teachable and growing moments that have enhanced my personal, professional, and academic lives. I speak to my diverse teaching experiences, building a new career and family in Canada, and tackling the goal of pursuing doctoral studies. My experiences have also been enriched by the experiences of teaching in Inuit communities, where I gained tremendous knowledge on inclusion and diversity related to culturally responsive pedagogy—thanks to the Government of Nunavut and the Department of Education. I have equally taught in different public schools within and outside of Canada, with students from different cultural backgrounds, including immigrants and children of immigrants from every continent.

I have experienced a variety of cultural moments through my personal and professional experiences that have motivated me to further study multicultural science education (MSE) during my doctorate. Furthermore, I have equally engaged in teaching second languages, such as French immersion and second language programs. Originally from West Africa, specifically from a rural community known as Matondo 2 Mbonge village - which is rich in cultural activities, coupled with experiences from South Korea, has greatly enhanced my understanding of different human perspectives. I plan to use culturally relevant and multicultural pedagogies to promote or add to the existing knowledge on science education, which is typically and predominately taught using

Eurocentric or Westernized pedagogical approaches. I call for many Canadian and immigrant educators in Canada to join the movement for inclusive education by engaging in doctoral studies to further this research field and aid in developing policies that safeguard MSE. My current position comes in tandem with many challenges, from immigration to adapting to new geographical environments, cultures, lifestyles, as well as family building. As pursuing studies like a doctorate is a significant process in one's life, it is essential to always consider balancing these challenges with academic pursuits. In my community of practice, we want to influence policies toward meaningful, pragmatic, inclusive pedagogical policies, and strategies. In addition, pursuing a higher level of education will be necessary to add value to lives and increase the depth of academic literature on multiculturalism, science education, and culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP).

Culturally responsive and sustainable pedagogy

My contributions to CRP come from my experience as a student from a multicultural background. I plan to employ CRP in my discussions as a guiding principle for inclusive and critical pedagogy, serving as an example of the Medicine Wheel, a holistic learning strategy for one's physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being (Mashford-Pringle & Shawanda, 2023). CRP is teaching that recognizes students' diversities, backgrounds, languages, family structures and social or cultural identities in the teaching process (Ladson-Billings, 2013). Practices of CRP have been evident in Nunavut. Nunavut is Canada's largest territory, with a low population of just over 32,000 inhabitants, 85% of whom are Inuit (Lévesque, 2015). Nunavummiut live in 25 communities scattered across a 2,093, 190-km^2 territory (Lévesque, 2015). Nunavut and its people have always existed, but the territory was formally recognized on April 1st, 1999, after the *Nunavut Act* was signed. According to

Ayres (2012), the Inuit desired a system of government that reflected their own distinct culture, decisions, and policies for individuals living within their boundaries. Inclusion within the Inuit education system is by incorporating Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ) and beliefs, laws, principles, values, and principles of the society for a positive impact on students' achievements (Ayres, 2012). Berger (2007) discusses how Qallunaat (non-Inuit) teachers who teach Inuit students in Nunavut risk continuing Euro-Canadian education. As a teacher here, with such lived experiences, I have gained many experiences on CRP.

CRP is a teaching approach that recognizes students' diversity, backgrounds, languages, family structures, and social or cultural identities through the teaching process (Ladson-Billings, 2013). CRP provides pedagogic approaches incorporating students' sociocultural and linguistic experiences (Tilsen et al., 2021). Implementing CRP requires outstanding knowledge about the sociocultural setting of any community. Paris' (2012) discourse further highlights CRP's importance in producing students who can achieve academic success while demonstrating social and cultural competence. Through CRP, students learn what is most relevant for them, while the teachers serve as agents of awareness, social justice, and radical shift in promoting students' knowledge and achievements (Codrington, 2014). To add significance, Tilsen et al. (2021) proposed that multicultural education and CRP should be implemented to achieve equity, social changes, and sociopolitical consciousness. With experience from my previous in-school teaching, specifically with the multicultural nature of schools in Ottawa, and teaching in Nunavut, I broadened my skills in understanding inclusive education and engaging with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. In addition to having teaching experiences in Cameroon, so far, in Canada, five years of my professional experiences have been in Nunavut.

Navigating the doctorate with life events

The next question I faced after my teaching experiences in Nunavut, was in regard to leaving my stable job and entering into a doctoral program. Would you leave a satisfying annual salary for a doctoral program? Many questioned me on my reasons and the necessity of pursuing a PhD. However, building on my academic and professional skills is a pursuit in personal fulfillment and satisfaction rather than just the finances. Personally, I hope that by refining my skills, I become more employable; thus, achieving more education remains an advantage, adding to the reasons for a doctoral study. Doctor of Philosophy of Education is the highest academic standing in the field. To remain a student requires complete and intense engagement, specifically in programs with restrictions and conditions related to funding, teaching, and research responsibilities. In addition to the changes, I experienced when transforming from professional back to student, during the second year of my PhD, I became a father of twins – a long-awaited blessing. However, the expansion of my family overlaid yet more demands on my time, energy, and attention. This meant I had to reconsider and reframe the lived reality of work-life balance. I had to ensure time and attention to my doctorate (work) within the spaces allowed from my responsibilities as a father (life). While at this point, I could have taken leave from my study program, I preferred not to as it had taken so long to complete my master's degree. Instead, I drew on my faith to reflect on my priorities and my capacity, and in this way, I found a way to reorganize my day-to-day schedule, adjust to nights of broken sleep, and continue my doctoral studies. This journey speaks to the different ebbs and flows of doctoral study – at times, all-encompassing, at other times, having to adjust to other priorities.

Unfortunately, in the middle of the comprehensive exams, while juggling financial challenges and the birth of our twins, we lost a significant figure in our family – my mother-in-law. With these stacked challenges, I was not surprised that I failed my comprehensive exams in the first attempt. This became an opportunity to enhance and extend my effectiveness in the second and last attempt of the exams, leading to successfully passing. It seems that while we plan to advance our dreams and purposes in life, that is when challenges find the most opportune time to assert themselves on us. We are all born great and unique, and despite challenges, we can overcome any presenting challenges with a little more effort.

COVID-19 was another life event to overcome. Challenges due to COVID-19 had not been an exemption in this growth process. The COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing inflation could have affected this journey. Though the pandemic did not affect the journey, the in-class students' interactions were a significant aspect missed but helped adjust to the present beneficial bimodal learning approach. I will always refer to challenges as opportunities for greatness. The case of COVID-19 and inflation cannot be ignored because we experienced a rise in the prices of items in the market and shops. These could have been potential hindrances to the continuity of my academic journey, but through resilience, I stood firm to overcome these challenges.

Discussion

Was a career change the best option?

Moving to Canada is a great dream, but facing the realities is a different story. Switching careers is familiar as many have had similar experiences, whether born in this country or recently arrived. Immigrating with a Master's in Biological Engineering, my dream was to continue with PhD in the same field. I volunteered with the Government of Canada for some time and used that time to gain clarity for my future. In reality, the closest viable career path was to become a teacher of Chemistry and Biology. I must thank the

Government of Quebec, for acknowledging my skills and accrediting me as a qualified teacher based on my prior teaching experiences in Cameroon. Having my prior experiences acknowledged this way was very validating, as I appreciate that international credentials only sometimes transfer easily to the Canadian context. While in Cameroon, I taught at private schools and was an examiner with the Cameroon General Certificate of Education (GCE) board for four years. Unfortunately, despite completing a master's degree in sciences, I could not secure admission in the same direction as a doctorate. I engaged myself in a related field, which was science education. Unlearning and learning new strategic approaches specific to Ontario and Canadian pedagogies from the University of Ottawa enhance my practical teaching abilities. Embracing teaching as a professional career has been my passion and life purpose. Since I made the decision, I have never been worried about the job market; instead, offers become limitless because of continuously added professional and academic skills.

How I got my admission to the doctorate degree

The following discussion is about navigating through the admission process. What challenges exist when applying to be admitted into a PhD program? A PhD is an entire journey that needs so much planning. However, even the best plans need adjustment because I wrote many letters to professors requesting them to be my supervisors but had no responses. I understand there are many potential graduate students out there with similar challenges. My lack of success was not due to the fact that these professors were unwilling to accept me for supervision based on my qualifications or other qualities; often, their research direction, visions, or goals might not have aligned with mine. Alternatively, they may have lacked the space or funding to mentor another doctoral student. For my PhD, I decided to look at an area of interest in Canadian education that could serve as a

solution that speaks to my identity as a visible minority. Triadafilopoulos (2021) stresses that the diversity of the workforce will continue to increase due to increased demand for immigrants to fill labour shortages. In line with the report from former Canadian Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, Sean Fraser, the number of expected immigrants to Canada was projected to grow from 431 645 in the year 2022 to 447,055 in 2023 and 451,000 in 2024 (Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada, 2022). Based on the rising demands of immigrants needed to fill labour shortages, the need to study strategies to enhance multiculturalism in science education and CRP may increase in Canada over time. Though I am yet to become an expert, working on this would benefit the entire Canadian educational system. My study on multiculturalism in science education will impact inclusive science education.

Structuring and defining research interest

To be sincere, I was frustrated with the process when no supervisors responded positively. One of the pieces of advice given to me by one of my professors in my B.Ed. program, Peter V. Milley, was very valuable. He advised and encouraged me to apply to the program and hope for the best. He noted that if one's topic interests any professor, then the chances of being contacted by that professor can increase. The strategy was to align my interests to match those of some specific professors, the University of Ottawa, and the Faculty of Education strategic plans such as Transformation 2030. This strategy worked, and I was finally admitted. Advice I will share with others is to look for a supervisor in your specific domain or topic of interest and align your interests and research intent to the faculty vision. Alignment will increase your chances for a match; so, your dreams may come to pass and not be limited because of the lack of a supervisor. Throughout this journey, every professor I have interacted with has been very supportive, and I sincerely appreciate my

supervisor, Professor Carole Sénéchal, for accepting me and all her outstanding guidance on my doctoral journey.

Conclusion

As a first-generation immigrant, I desire to encourage other immigrants, specifically those called to academia and teaching, to never lose hope. Teaching is a noble, gratifying, and satisfying profession in Canada. I am writing this paper after passing my comprehensive exams for my doctoral studies. Challenges come up in different forms. Time remains fundamental in accomplishing specific assignments and purposes in life. Planning a doctoral study does not necessarily equate to having a smooth ride through the process.

Nonetheless, when challenges arise, one needs to strategize while remaining focused. I would not be at this stage of my studies if my attention was simply directed at the challenges. Many students may be interested in advancing their academics but may have many challenging questions about what to do and what steps to take to obtain these realities. These lived experiences provide answers or show possible ways forward in challenging times. Despite the many storms of life that may arise, giving up is not an option.

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Jenny Stodola is a PhD candidate in Education (University of Ottawa). A second-generation Canadian of Czech descent, she is the first in her family to pursue a doctorate degree. Previously studying biochemistry, virology, and immunology she professionally leverages her interests in health sciences education as an instructional designer/educational developer. Supervised by Professors E.Y. Koné and D. Archibald, her PhD reconciliation research intends to explore how settler family physicians and trainees can develop better relationships with their Indigenous patients.

Abstract

This commentary examines the financial precarity experienced by PhD students and its impact on their studies, careers, and mental health from a personal narrative perspective. The rising cost of higher education and declining funding opportunities have placed many PhD students in a precarious financial situation, causing increased stress and anxiety, which can negatively affect their academic performance and career prospects. Through the experiences of PhD students, the article discusses how financial precarity can limit access to resources and opportunities, require additional time commitments to outside work, and pose mental health challenges. It also suggests potential solutions, such as increased funding opportunities, improved financial literacy education, and greater institutional support for students' mental health. By sharing personal stories from the authors and their peers, the article emphasizes the importance of recognizing and addressing the financial precarity of PhD students to promote their academic success and well-being.

Keywords: *Graduate studies; lived experience; finances; financial precarity; student funding; student supports*

Introduction (Welcome to the Problem)

Financial instability among doctoral students is a critical matter that significantly influences their academic experiences, professional trajectories, and mental well-being. This commentary explores the obstacles encountered by PhD students, enrolled in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa, as a result of the escalating expenses associated with higher education and the diminishing availability of funding opportunities. Such financial uncertainty poses various challenges that contribute to heightened stress and anxiety levels, ultimately impairing academic performance and career prospects. Financial precarity manifests in diverse ways, including limited access to vital resources and opportunities, increased commitments to external employment, and mental health issues. For instance, some students struggle to afford essential academic materials like textbooks or travel expenses for conferences, while others must undertake multiple jobs to make ends meet, leaving minimal time for research and coursework. These hurdles often lead to exhaustion, decreased motivation, and reduced satisfaction with academic life.

Research (below mentioned) suggests that institutions can address these concerns by offering increased funding opportunities, enhancing financial literacy education, and providing comprehensive support for students' mental health and well-being. Furthermore, cultivating an equitable academic environment can be achieved through the provision of resources like childcare services and affordable housing. Nonetheless, financial instability remains a pervasive challenge among PhD students, profoundly impacting their academic achievements and overall welfare (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2020). Recognizing and tackling this issue is imperative to ensure equal opportunities for all students to succeed in their scholarly pursuits. By implementing targeted interventions and systemic reforms, institutions can foster an environment that nurtures the aspirations and

potentials of PhD students, ultimately leading to a more inclusive and prosperous academic landscape.

In this commentary, the authors, both PhD students, are committed to bringing the financially-related lived experience of the contemporary Education graduate student to the fore. Stemming from our own experiences of financial precarities and hearing similar challenges from our peer group, we strived to incorporate these experiential accounts as complementary evidence to the formal literature on the topic. Over the first year of our PhD studies, we engaged in an informal community discussion of the financial challenges experienced by fellow students within our program and cohort. Given the sensitive nature of topic and potential impacts on individuals in their disclosures, we consciously took on the "public-facing" role as the published co-authors of this commentary. However, our writings include anonymized direct quotes from peer-colleagues in our program cohort to be able to hear from others in their own words. Thus, we hoped to bring to light issues of importance across many individuals from various backgrounds while recognizing and protecting their inherent vulnerability as graduate students within the academic hierarchy. Our privilege as stated co-authors should not overshadow the anonymous co-author peers, to whom we are grateful for their contributions. By employing this writing approach, we aimed to shed light on the multifaceted issues stemming from financial precarity and its impact on the journey of PhD students. Through the utilization of first-hand accounts, our informal exploration and subsequent commentary aim to provide a deeper understanding of the negative repercussions associated with financial struggles during this critical academic phase.

A brief review of literature (Through the looking glass)

Universities play a vital role in the formation of students' identities and values, with a

university degree being widely recognized as a valuable form of social capital associated with various dimensions of well-being (Crutchfield et al., 2020; El Zein et al., 2020). However, the student population within higher education has undergone significant changes over time. Historically, access to higher education was limited to individuals from privileged backgrounds, but today, there is a notable increase in students from marginalized groups, including those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, non-traditional and non-conforming individuals, and racialized communities (Broton et al., 2018). This shift in demographics has had a profound impact on the student experience, particularly in terms of the affordability of pursuing a higher education. The rising cost of tuition and cost of living has forced students to make difficult choices, often prioritizing expenses such as tuition and housing over other essential needs like food, physical well-being, and mental health, leading to an increased risk of facing insecurities in meeting basic needs (Abu et al., 2022; Hagedorn-Hatfield et al., 2022).

Unfortunately, experiences of financial struggle remain muted within academic communities due to their normalization. The prevailing notions of romanticizing struggling students and turning their sufferings into a shared experience and rite of passage (Maynard et al., 2018; Kopetman, 2017), discourage students from openly discussing their hardships (Gupton, 2017) and this effect is exacerbated by: reduced public funding in the higher education sector over the last several decades, stagnating Teaching and Research Assistant wages and government-funded scholarships over the last 20 years, and recent spikes in inflation across the Canadian economy (Jehn et al. 2021; Laframboise et al., 2023; Lang, 2022). From a socioemotional perspective, basic needs insecurity engenders feelings of shame, embarrassment, social stigmatization, anxiety, and depression, hindering socialization and contributing to a sense of disconnection, hopelessness, and loneliness (Beam & Kim,

2020; Martinez et al., 2020). Therefore, the financial disparities prevalent among students in academia, coupled with the direct link between such disparities and the prevalence of basic needs insecurity within the graduate student population, should raise concerns within the academic community (Jehn et al., 2021; Laframboise et al., 2023).

Figure 1

Living in financial precarity is much like taking the base piece off a tower of blocks (Credit: Keven Malik, Pexels, Used with permission)
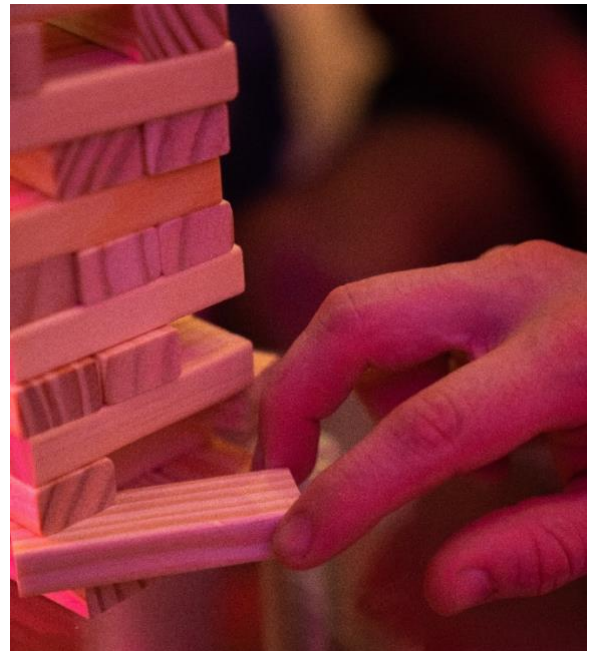
How this piece came to be (Connecting through our stories)

In the first year of our graduate studies we heard from a number of graduate students from our cohort regarding the topic of financial (in)stability regarding their initial decision to apply and remain within the PhD in Education program. Given this topic impacts every student, past, present, and future, we decided to document more formally our informal conversations through a commentary article. Furthermore, while not immune to financial concerns, we each felt that our particular combinations of personal, interpersonal, and institutional privileges placed us in a position to

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act as the "faces" of a commentary article of this nature. As such, we aimed to gather anonymous perspectives from a diverse range of individuals to enhance our commentary while being mindful of the sensitive and personal nature of the questions we would pose to our peers. In alignment with the thematic focus of this edition of the Education Review, we limited our conversations to our English cohort of peers, specifically those who joined the program in Fall 2021. Fortunately, as authors, we had developed interpersonal relationships with the majority of our cohort members over the past three years, thanks to our personalities and positionalities. Through coursework in our first year, informal gatherings (both in-person and virtual), and virtual group chats, we gained a general understanding of each individual's personality and overall positionality upon entering the PhD program.

While we were not privy to the specifics of individuals' personal financial circumstances, discussions surrounding Teaching and Research Assistantships, scholarship requirements, grant applications, and conversations about part-time and full-time employment, as well as their student status (domestic or international), provided insights into their financial circumstances. Armed with this knowledge and awareness of individuals' dispositions, we informally approached nine peers to gauge their comfort in participating and responding to our inquiries. In our quest to capture a diverse range of perspectives, we leveraged our existing knowledge to invite individuals representing various personal situations. This included reaching out to some contributors of articles in this special edition, as well as individuals who, for various reasons, were unable or uninterested in committing the time required to author a full article. We had mutual agreement that their discussion points

would be included anonymously[1] in whole or in part in our article as was appropriate, but that we would only use direct quotes to maintain the integrity of their lived perspectives. Though we cannot acknowledge them in name, we consider them as contributing co-authors to this article.

During a particularly busy period in our cohort's program, we reached out to our peers, and to our delight, we received responses from eight out of the nine individuals contacted. It is worth noting that despite their busy schedules, they displayed remarkable receptiveness towards discussing the issues at hand and expressed comfort in sharing their thoughts with us through asynchronous email communication, after assurances of anonymity in print. One of these individuals, after a brief deliberation, declined to participate due to the perception that their lived experience (characterized by overall financial stability derived from substantial support from their spouse, extended family, and workplace), did not align with the purpose of our commentary. Although we would have valued insights from their situation, a consensus was reached among the authors to reserve the space in this article for the voices of individuals facing greater precarity.

It must be noted that throughout our discussions we did not explicitly ask questions about or probe the implications of visible and invisible disabilities on the financial situation of our peers, although research has shown that students with disabilities experience additional financial burdens while pursuing post-secondary education in Canada (Chambers et al., 2013). Such disclosures were not volunteered by participants, and given our relationship to participants and the informal nature of our discussions, we decided it was not our place to pursue this avenue of inquiry.

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[1] Any personally identifiable information in direct quotes were edited using square brackets to more generic characteristics.

In the subsequent section, we provide a summary and highlight in their own words the lived experiences of six graduate students within our cohort that shape their levels of financial precarity. This encompasses their initial motivations for pursuing a PhD, the influence of their student status (domestic versus international), the various income streams impacting their overall stability, as well as the benefits they receive. To ensure confidentiality and protect identities, we will include select quotations from our peers while maintaining their anonymity. Additionally, we, Jenny and Shaily, will interweave our own lived experiences and observations from our three years in the program to address broader themes that may not be explicitly expressed by our peers in their informal responses.

The financial realities of the PhD experience (Learning from our shared narratives)

Decision process leading to deciding to do a PhD

In response to inquiries regarding the decision-making process that led to pursuing a PhD, two overarching themes emerged from the respondents' accounts. The first theme revolved around the inclination towards entering academia following the completion of the doctoral program, driven by a genuine interest in the academic sphere and aspirations for a career within it. The second theme pertained to the motivation to enhance overall employment prospects, encompassing a broader scope beyond the academic realm.

> "I knew if I wanted to make a real career in academia in Canada, I needed a PhD; plus, I am endlessly fascinated by education." (Peer 4)

> "Despite my [master's level] qualifications, I struggled to secure employment in my field after graduation. Hoping to improve my chances of finding a job in academia, I decided to pursue a PhD in Education.

So, my decision to pursue a PhD was essentially driven by a desire to improve our financial situation." (Peer 1)

While our peers indeed recognized the potential for future stability and higher incomes, it became evident that during the initial stages of the program, particularly in the second year, their primary concern revolved around meticulous budgeting to accommodate the financial constraints inherent in the graduate lifestyle, which limited opportunities for additional income. Nearly all our peers emphasized the indispensable role played by the University of Ottawa, Faculty of Education's admission scholarship, which covers tuition fees for a duration of four years (University of Ottawa, n.d.). The assurance of continued financial support through teaching or research assistantships at the university constituted the latter half of this scholarship (University of Ottawa, n.d.). It was frequently noted by our peers that the decision to pursue a PhD was contingent upon securing this scholarship.

> "The second step was talking to my [partner] about financial implications. I wasn't sure how much funding I would receive, so we decided that if I didn't get a full ride with options for employment at any of the schools to which I applied, I would wait and try again – teaching/supply teaching high school in the meantime. Paying tuition for the PhD was not an option for us." (Peer 4)

> "If it were not for the scholarships I received through U of Ottawa, I would not even have imagined doing a PhD in Canada. It would not be realistic at all… even with the scholarships, at the end of the month, it is still a huge stress to make ends meet." (Peer 3)

> "Being a recipient of the International Doctoral Scholarship, my tuition fees are the same as those of local students.

Truthfully, this scholarship was the primary reason for my decision to study at uOttawa, as I would not have been able to afford international tuition fees for a degree that could take several years to complete." (Peer 2)

Although we did not explicitly inquire whether our peers would have chosen to enroll in the PhD program in the absence of the admission scholarship, a substantial portion of our respondents, including the co-authors of this paper, allude, either directly or indirectly in their responses, to the pivotal role that this financial assistance played in their decision-making process. While it is important to note that these observations do not encompass the entire cohort, we, as co-authors, acknowledge that several of our peers within our academic group share analogous circumstances, collectively constituting a noteworthy proportion of the current student body.

In combination with the admission scholarship and its conditions, almost all our peers rely on partners or family to help support them financially, but often creative solutions were required to "make it through" the monthly budget.

> "Receiving a full scholarship[2] from uOttawa was incredibly helpful, and I also benefited greatly from the TA and RA positions. That being said, I would have to be realistic and say that if it wasn't for my [partner's] support, I doubt I could have sustained myself financially on my own." (Peer 1)

> "While I am fortunate to have my [partner's] financial support for our living expenses, I am responsible for paying my tuition fees. Therefore, all of the money that I earn from my TA-ships and RA-ships goes towards saving for my tuition

fees... I only allocate a small portion of my income for my personal expenses and try to save as much as possible." (Peer 2)

> "We spent a lot of nights mapping out possible budgets – as well as different avenues to generate more income. Fortunately, I'm an Ontario student, so I was able to apply for OSAP [Ontario Students Assistance Program]. However, my partner is from outside of the country, which means that [their] fees have tripled. Halfway through [their] studies, though, [they were] granted permanent residency, which eased a lot of tensions we had toward money." (Peer 5)

The "10-hour work per week" rule

As a full-time graduate student at the University of Ottawa, emphasis is placed on dedicating oneself to research and fulfilling the degree requirements and discourages external employment. However, for those who have been granted the admission scholarship, this policy is enforced by imposing restrictions on the number of work hours. Specifically, the limit is set at 170 hours per semester, with the possibility of requesting an extension to a maximum of 200 hours per semester (uOttawa Financial Awards). Failure to adhere to this work limitation or seeking employment outside the university jeopardizes the continuity of the scholarship.

Through conversations with fellow peers across the cohort (i.e., even beyond the few engaged in our specific discussions for this article), it became apparent that individuals facing moderate to high levels of financial precarity often resort to "creative" strategies to meet their financial obligations. Some individuals have chosen to disclose to their supervisors that they are engaged in multiple part-time or even full-time jobs, whether

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[2] A full scholarship from University of Ottawa includes a 75,000 CAD award that is partially allocated to tuition fees and partially paid to the recipient in the form of teaching and research contracts.

affiliated with the university or not, while others intentionally withhold this information. The response from faculty supervisors upon learning of their students' extensive employment during the PhD program varies, ranging from tacit acceptance to wholehearted support. However, there are instances where supervisors display deliberate malice or inflexible attitudes. On the other hand, certain individuals entered the PhD program with their supervisors being aware of their concurrent activities, while their primary employers remained unaware of their pursuit of a degree. In all cases, individuals took additional measures and assumed responsibility to ensure maximum flexibility in managing their various commitments, minimizing the risk of missing deadlines or deliverables. Through our personal experience within the program and in chatting with peers, it is clear the most demanding phase for individuals in such situations occurred during the coursework phase (year one of the program), where attendance in classes could rarely be excused due to work obligations. However, as the program progresses beyond this phase, graduate work becomes more intrinsically motivated and independently driven, offering the advantage of enhanced schedule flexibility.

"At the beginning, I relied solely on TA and RA work to get by in terms of my finances. However, we quickly saw our money run out. So, I had to get a few different part-time jobs to sustain me. I'm a qualified teacher, and was able to work quite a few days as a supply teacher – which has proven to be very helpful. I also work at a bar/restaurant on the weekends, and the money from this employment has also been instrumental in keeping us afloat." (Peer 5)

"The first year of the PhD program, I did have a part time job teaching at [another institution], but only because I'd already agreed to take that position before I heard whether I was accepted into the PhD program. Since that ended, because I didn't know how strict (or relaxed) the 'no-work-outside-of-uOttawa' rule was, I have only had 'side hustles' alongside my PhD work and TA / RA work. These have included tutoring, selling art, driving a dog taxi, etc. ... I'm planning to apply to contract-teach some courses in the Faculty of Education next year. (Peer 4)

For some, the benefits of being in the program brought benefits to easing the personal budget early on. One respondent indicated:

"Since starting my PhD program, I have been able to secure a part-time job that I doubt I would have landed without it." (Peer 1)

Frustrations with the TA/RA process[3]

Readers may have already identified through the previously-shared peer reflections, a prominent area of frustration that emerged for many: the Teaching/Research Assistantship process. These assistantships are typically obligatory components of the program, tied to scholarship conditions. Nonetheless, significant challenges arise due to the lack of transparency surrounding this process. Consequently, graduate students swiftly realize the need to assume full responsibility for actively pursuing these opportunities, ensuring that they not only fulfill the program requirements but also maintain financial stability.

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[3] Between the time of the discussions and publishing, the University of Ottawa migrated all employment contracts to a new software system. While the action of applying for a TA/RA position is slightly more streamlined, overall transparency and other concerns raised by our peers remain the same.

"I quickly discovered that relying on the TA/RAships from the University of Ottawa meant being entirely at the whim of haphazard and delayed hiring processes for contracts with tremendously varying hours and requirements. Each semester saw me sending repeated desperate emails to the Faculty regarding how essential the TA and RA contracts were to my ability to pay the rent, cover my cost of living and that I was entirely depending on them for awarding these contracts in an efficient, clear and transparent way. It would often take two months after the semester began to hear back about an application. Often, I would be awarded a contract for a position I hadn't even applied for, or where qualifications I didn't have were required. By the start of my second year, I realized that I could not live with such job insecurity and uncertainty month to month, that I had to search for reliable and predictable work outside of the temporary-contract driven precarious nature of working in higher education." (Peer 6)

"I definitely rely on TA/RA-ships. I've been successful in obtaining those positions, yes, but only because I took initiative. I do not rely on the application system, for example, as I've never heard anything back from that service. After the first semester of no work due to that issue, I took matters into my own hands. Now, I actively email professors with whom I feel connected to ask if they have any TA or RA positions open, or if they know anyone who does. That has been the only way I've received employment." (Peer 4)

"[O]btaining a TA or RA position in the university is quite ambiguous. I do not know how the system works. One term I apply to nearly all the positions I feel comfortable with and not got selected and the other I apply again and I got selected. It really is quite confusing. Is there a ranking system? What are the criteria for being selected? What happens when one does not get an offer for two consecutive terms despite the admissions scholarship contract? It is really frustrating and contributing to the stress factor. I am never sure if I can be able pay the rent or the bills the next term." (Peer 3)

"I rely on TA-ships and RA-ships to pay for my tuition fees. But as we know, these work opportunities are not always guaranteed every semester, so I would try to apply for as many positions as possible. There was one semester that I did not get any offer, and that meant I would have to find work opportunities outside the university. Being new in the Canadian workforce (outside academia), I had a hard time landing a job related to teaching or research. So I considered working in other areas. I got hired as a receptionist in a retirement home. I loved the job as I got to connect with people and serve the elderly, but of course, the pay was a minimum. I had to do extra shifts so I could cover my tuition fees. But that also translated to hours away from working on my research topic and from my courses. Nonetheless, I was very grateful for the job opportunity. It paid my tuition fees, and I established meaningful connections with many people. I eventually had to leave the job as I got several TA/RA-ship offers the following semester. Complete dependence on TA/RA-ships for financial support during each semester is quite nerve-wracking, as there is always the worry of not receiving another offer for the next term. This can be quite an ordeal." (Peer 1)

Once the initial barrier of building a network to find teaching and research assistantship is overcome however, this informal network is critical to sustaining subsequent employment opportunities.

> "[O]nce a professor or researcher sees and likes your work ethic, they're more likely to hire you again, offer you various positions, and excel your wallet. I've been fortunate enough to work with a variety of professors who have taken me under their wing and provided me additional financial support through research and teaching tasks. These tasks, on top of almost full-time work, make it manageable to live in a big city and afford all of the necessities." (Peer 5)

Our final thoughts (What we learned and what we still need to learn)

The insights gleaned not only from our discussions with our peers highlighted in this piece, but also generally with our greater cohort community, point to important elements of the contemporary graduate experience that cannot be ignored. First, the almost unanimous frustration at the current state of the PhD experience, highlighting a regrettable circumstance whereby success in this pursuit often hinges upon financial resources or a willingness to endure prolonged financial precarity. Ideally, the prerequisites for a fruitful PhD journey should not necessitate independent wealth or impose a life of poverty as the only viable option. Related to this, from our observations, it would be fair to presume that generally PhD students tend to underreport the various ways they may earn a living to keep up with the cost of living to official channels (e.g., their supervisor and/or the University), be it from how many (and how) they obtain various Teaching and Research Assistantships, work one or more part-time

jobs outside of academia, or even commit to a full-time position. Many students work hard to maintain this increase in workload and juggle their commitments, but it is inevitable that the pace of their graduate studies may be impacted in such situations.

Second, throughout our conversations, we heard repeated expressions of gratitude and relief from participants at having the opportunity to share experiences related to this topic and feeling supported and validated in their circumstances as a result of having the opportunity to contribute to this commentary article. This informal series of conversations underscores the relevance and weight of the financial struggles encountered during the pursuit of a PhD, and while gratitude is expressed for the support received from family and friends, discussing this matter with them can prove challenging. We hope that sharing our own lived experiences and that of our peer co-authors' in their own words brings focus and clarity to the current financial precarities of graduate studies.

The disconcerting unemployment statistics among PhD graduates (Lang, 2022; Walters & Howells, 2021) raise alarm, as it is troubling to consider the prospect of facing significant sacrifices to obtain a doctoral degree, only to encounter difficulty in securing suitable employment (Suomi et al., 2020). This is particularly disappointing since, as mentioned above in the shared reflections, for many their main reason for pursuing a doctorate degree was the prospects of better employment. We as a community, urge and firmly advocate for universities to provide enhanced support to PhD candidates in shaping their career paths, particularly for career avenues outside of academia. Currently, while workshops are offered to graduate students, there exists a notable absence of dedicated support tailored specifically for PhD students.

In closing, we believe that higher education institutions must prioritize the mitigation of financial precarity among PhD students in

order to foster an environment of equity, inclusion, and support. To achieve this, universities should consider implementing several key strategies. Firstly, expanding scholarship and funding opportunities specifically tailored for PhD students, with a particular focus on students from marginalized backgrounds, can alleviate financial burdens and enhance access to higher education. Transparent and equitable processes for Teaching/Research Assistantships should be established to ensure fair distribution of opportunities and alleviate the challenges associated with securing funding. Finally, the gradual increase in the cost of living over the past decade coupled with rapid inflation since the COVID-19 pandemic and the reality of stagnant Teaching/Research Assistantship wages, creates conditions where it is both impossible and irresponsible to think that students can take the program without working on the side. The University is strongly encouraged to rethink what structure a contemporary PhD program could take on to accommodate this ongoing reality.

In addition, developing comprehensive financial literacy programs can equip students with the necessary skills to effectively manage their finances throughout their academic journey. Unfortunately, while the literature reports on some studies of "financial education interventions among undergraduates and non-students, there remains a substantial gap in the literature when it comes to financial education programs for graduate students" (Short et al., 2019, p. 50) and identifying institution-specific services is challenging. By providing resources, guidance, and support, and ensuring that such resources are available along with recruitment materials and accessible during the application process, universities can empower future and current PhD students to make informed financial decisions and navigate their studies with greater confidence. In addition to institutional efforts, creating a culture of open dialogue and removing the stigma around financial struggles is crucial. Establishing

support networks, counselling services, and mentorship programs specifically addressing the financial well-being of PhD students can provide a safe space for students to seek guidance and assistance. Collaboration with external organizations and government agencies can also help in expanding financial resources and support systems for students.

Further research and ongoing discussions are vital to fully understanding the complexities of financial precarity among PhD students. Research findings in recent broader evaluations of student surveys in Canadian post-secondary institutions (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2022) confirm our view that exploring the intersectionality of identities and their impact on financial challenges can inform targeted interventions and support strategies. Additionally, studying the long-term consequences of financial precarity on career trajectories and overall well-being can guide policy changes and institutional practices. We urge researchers, practitioners, and institutions to continue to question their situations and seek to disrupt the existing structures which reinforce structures of inequity. By proactively addressing financial precarity, higher education institutions can create an environment that enables PhD students to embark on their educational journeys with greater financial security, equal opportunities, inclusivity, and the necessary support to thrive both academically and personally.

Acknowledgements & Thanks (We are grateful for you and your stories)

section. Every researcher deserves a living wage: we recommend Support Our Science for more advocacy on these related issues.

Reflections on the Cohort

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Teaching PhD students in the first term of their first year is an honour for a professor like me. The diverse life experiences and unfeigned commitment to learning that they bring makes the *Educational Epistemologies* class a genuine pleasure to teach. As the articles in this edition illustrate, a lot of factors can complicate PhD studies: travel, financial precarity, pregnancy, language, parenthood, mental health stresses and so on.

But the Fall 2021 cohort had one more, unprecedented challenge: a worldwide COVID-19 pandemic that forced everything, including courses, online. This could have been a big problem, especially for an 'old dogs' like me who had to 'learn new tricks' in order to provide the kind of engaged, social experience that I consider crucial for deep learning. Fortunately, things worked out well. And most of that can be attributed to the amazing students in this cohort. Two things in particular impressed me about them both then as students completing coursework and now with this special issue of *Education Review*.

First, they cultivated community, in spite of the challenges of distance. Using various social media tools—about which I remain largely ignorant—they found ways to build relationships, support one another, and create spaces for sharing tips, advice, mentorship and so on. Social support was crucial to my own PhD 18 years ago, but I had the advantage of working most days in a 9-person office with other graduate students. The 2021 cohort created community themselves over vast distances.

Second, the work they have done in this issue is a gift to future PhD students. The articles describe struggles, successes and lessons learned across a range of issues central to the PhD experience—everything from unexpected life events like pregnancy, to the experiences of mature scholars, to practical and accessible pointers for how to write comprehensive exams. They are thinking, generously, about those who will follow them on this path. While McCracken's article may be focused primarily on future Métis students, her statement will hopefully extend to all graduate students who read this issue: "[f]or kinship reading this work, please know that you are not alone as you enter these spaces…know that your community supports you."

In recent years I have come to think of this—supporting those who come after you—as the most important thing we do in academia. (Indeed, we should perhaps take a similar ethical stance in life generally.) My own students may be tired of hearing this, but I see them as the young coral polyps at the growing edge of the reef of educational thought, and myself as one small part of the aging, calcifying coral that supports their growth. I am OK with that role. The people in the Fall 2021 cohort—although still very much young coral polyps—are already taking on the responsibility of supporting those who follow. They are an impressive group.

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