



The lived experiences of female educational leadership doctoral students

The lived experiences of female students

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Abstract

Purpose – There is a meager body of research addressing the role educational leadership preparation programs in colleges and universities play in preparing women leaders. Also educational leadership preparation research has yet to explore ways in which mentorship provides additional capital for female graduate students. This study seeks to understand the challenges facing, and the opportunities available to, female graduate students in educational leadership departments.

Design/methodology/approach – The study used qualitative methods to explore the constructs of educational leadership preparation and mentorship of female graduate students. Qualitative methods, specifically a questionnaire and a collaborative focus group, were informed by the work of feminist theory and were used to explore participants' experiences and perceptions with the larger purpose of understanding the implications of their experiences for the development of strategies and programs intended to support female graduate students.

Findings – The following themes emerged from the participants' stories: constraints within the organizational culture, personal and familial sacrifice, struggles with identity, questioning self, and experiences with mentoring.

Practical implications – The findings have important implications for the roles university leadership preparation program structures might play in supporting female graduate students and their career success. The findings also offer recommendations for the development of mentoring programs for female graduate students.

Originality/value – Currently, there is an exceptional lack of research documenting the lived experiences of female doctoral students, particularly research that can be used to inform policy and program development. To that end, the qualitative study described in this paper helps in understanding the challenges facing, and the opportunities available to, female graduate students in educational leadership departments as well as in understanding the implications of such experiences for the development of strategies and programs intended to support female graduate students.

Keywords Gender, Women, Graduates, Higher education, Mentoring

Paper type Research paper

Progress toward gender equity in higher education has been described as “glacial” and “excruciatingly slow” (Marschke *et al.*, 2007, p. 1). Female professors in the USA continue to earn less, are promoted more slowly and less often, and struggle with heavier teaching and service loads than men (Acker and Armenti, 2004; August and Waltman, 2004; Austin, 2002; Haring-Hildore and Paludi, 1987; Johnsrud, 1990; Toutkoushian *et al.*, 2007). Female academics report feeling that they must work harder to be perceived as legitimate scholars (Acker and Armenti, 2004), and abundant research reveals a “glass ceiling” preventing many women from obtaining leadership positions in higher education.



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Less plentiful is research focused on women in specific programs and departments, such as educational leadership. What research exists, however, portrays an environment of isolation and marginalization for women (Marshall, 2003; Skrla, 2003a; Young, 2005). Indeed, according to Rusch (2004), both educational leadership preparation classrooms and research remain “constrained by an ideology that is primarily malecentric” (p. 21).

While both faculty and graduate students are affected by gender bias in higher education, female students occupy a particularly vulnerable position. Similar to female students in other fields shaped by a strongly gendered history, female educational leadership students continue to face bias and lack power (Jaschik, 2006; Limbert, 1995; Mallinckrodt and Leong, 1992; Schwiebert, 2000). Indeed, there are persistent gaps in the experiences of female graduate students, in the form of networking, mentoring, assistantships and other support, as well as in the level of respect, recognition and publishing opportunities they are afforded (Austin, 2002; Jaschik, 2005a, b, 2006). Given that such experiences are not only considered crucial for exposing students to the skills and expectations of an academic career, but also tend to lead to significant mentoring relationships (Austin, 2002; Jaschik, 2006), more should be done to understand why these gaps exist and how they can be best addressed.

Currently, there is an exceptional lack of research documenting the lived experiences of female doctoral students, particularly research that can be used to inform policy and program development (Jaschik, 2005a; Solomon, 1985). To that end, the qualitative study described in this paper seeks to understand the challenges facing and the opportunities available to female graduate students in educational leadership departments[1] as well as to understand the implications of such experiences for the development of strategies and programs intended to support female graduate students.

Literature review

According to Rhode (2003), male executives tend to be drawn to mentoring and building informal relationships with “other men who seem most similar in backgrounds, experiences, and values ... and enjoy the bonding that occurs in all-male social or sporting events ... [leading to] networks of advice, contacts and support” (pp. 12-13). This tendency is found in other fields as well; frequently leading to what Gherardi (1995) has referred to as “homosociability,” which provides “tickets of entry” to organizational culture for males (p. 173) (also see Alvesson and Billing, 1997). Participation in informal networks, then, is more difficult for those without “tickets,” and even harder for those with major responsibilities outside of the organization, such as women with family commitments. Female executives and junior women “lack time for the social activities that could generate collegial support and client contacts” (Rhode, 2003, p. 13; also see Alvesson and Billing, 1997).

The literature points to an “accumulation of disadvantages” that leads to an “unaccommodating culture” for women in academe. As noted in the introduction, female graduate students, when compared to their male counterparts, have had fairly uneven experiences. According to Marschke *et al.* (2007), lack of opportunity and mentorship underlies, in large part, why women do not advance as quickly as men in higher education as well as why they are more likely than men to “leave the occupation altogether” (p. 3) (see also, Clarida, 1997; Dixon-Reeves, 2003; Edwards-Alexander, 2005; Garcia, 1999; Garvey, 1999; Gordon, 1999; Hanna, 2005; Manuelito-Kerkvliet,

2005; Schwartz *et al.*, 2003). The attrition of women from higher education arenas is a rarely discussed problem. "Women's attrition from academia indicates at best a leaky pipeline and, at worst, an occupation mired in institutional discrimination" (Marschke *et al.*, 2007, p. 3).

In addition to lack of mentoring, though in some ways the two are linked, women have difficulty navigating organizational culture and climate (Lovitts and Nelson, 2000; Rhode, 2003) and cite difficulties balancing work-family roles and financial obligations (Moyer *et al.*, 1999). Maher *et al.* (2004) found that many women encountered one or more major obstacles that delayed progress, including: child-care responsibilities; disruption of family life due to death or divorce, and/or the inability to secure stable funding (see also Dey and Hill, 2008; Sallee, 2008). Finally, women reported less success in securing research experiences that aided dissertation efforts as well as a lack of confidence in their ability to navigate implicit institutional mores. However, the opposite was true of early-finishing female students (completing the PhD in four years or less): these students were able to enlist the aid of a competent and involved advisor, to secure stable funding and to engage in meaningful research (Maher *et al.*, 2004), reflecting effective mentoring practices (Johnson and Huwe, 2003).

Despite the fact that the higher education arena at least informally values mentoring between faculty and graduate students, scant research is available concerning graduate student mentorship programs overall (Johnson and Huwe, 2003). The research that does exist indicates students who have professional and personal mentors feel more committed to their work, have greater career aspirations, and report higher self-esteem (Gilbert *et al.*, 1983).

Mentoring remains largely an informal activity in most graduate departments, and due to the established culture of graduate education, it had been, until relatively recently, a predominantly white male experience (Lovitts, 2001). Academia has historically been comprised of Euro-American males (Moyer *et al.*, 1999), making it difficult for female and ethnic/racial minority students to find faculty members that share related identities and experiences. Studies show that multicultural female mentoring pairings (Kalbfleisch and Davies, 1991), along with increases in numbers of women in the workplace (Spreitzer, 1995), are having positive effects on self-esteem, relationship-building, feelings of preparedness, and persistence. Finally, mentoring relationships with female faculty are cited as important to women's graduate school completion (Moyer *et al.*, 1999; Neumark and Gardecki, 1997).

Theory and method

Researching the experiences of female doctoral students necessitates using a framework and methodology that values and enables a deep exploration of women's lives. As a result, we used a feminist perspective and set of qualitative tools to address the following three questions:

- (1) What have been participant's gender-related experiences in their educational leadership doctoral programs?
- (2) What are their perceived needs for success as female educational leadership graduate students?
- (3) What is the nature of their experiences with mentorship?

Feminist research places gender centrally within one's inquiry. It "problematizes women's diverse situations as well as the gendered institutions and material and historical structures that frame those" (Olesen, 2005, p. 236). Methodologically, feminist qualitative research tends to be collaborative, and participants are viewed as partners whose voices are included in multiple stages of the research process, such as in data collection, analysis and interpretation (Lather, 1992; Skrla, 2003; Young, 2005). Finally, feminist research does not end at description; rather, research for and about women sets the stage for action and transformation (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

In an effort to explore a wide variety of female graduate students' experiences, our project employed a purposeful sampling strategy. We sought to include graduate students who:

- were females;
- were enrolled in a PhD program within an educational leadership department; and
- varied demographically (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007).

To aid in our selection, a preliminary questionnaire was administered to determine both individual demographic variation and the degree to which students had received mentoring.

The sample of 12 women included in our study represented a variety of demographic characteristics. For example, ages ranged from late 20s to late 50s. One described her race as "Black;" two claimed "Asian" as their race; two described themselves as "Latina;" six identified as "White," while one described herself as "multi-ethnic". The majority of participants (75 percent) were born in the USA; others were born in Mexico, South Korea, and Taiwan. A majority of the women (75 percent) claimed English as their native language; others reported growing up speaking one or more of four world languages. Of the 12 participants, five were single, five were married, one was divorced, and one was engaged. Five women were parenting and/or taking care of elderly parents. A total of 11 of 12 participants describe their sexual orientation as, "hetero" or "straight" while one woman describes herself as "gay". Five of 12 participants are first-generation college students.

We utilized a collaborative focus group interview strategy to gather data, in which we served as discussion facilitators and partners in the research process, thus "helping interviewees become as forthcoming and as accurate as possible" (Ritchie, 2003, p. 84). We employed an open-ended focus group protocol that invited participants to speak in their own voices; yielding "quotable, first-person prose that enlivens historical narratives" (Ritchie, 2003, p. 119). Two focus groups met for an extended period of time for a total of 6.5 hours.

Throughout the research process, we conducted data analysis in the form of coding, teasing out themes, making clusters, and writing summaries. Throughout, we were cognizant of the impossibility of "pure description" (Wolcott, 1994) and the "inescapable incursion of values into human activity" (Lather, 1992). Thus, "member checking" was an important step in the research process, whereby we shared tentative conclusions and participants contributed to manuscript editing (Creswell, 2003; Morgan, 1997; Ritchie, 2003).

Findings

The results of our analysis revealed significant findings in five general areas: constraints within the organizational culture, personal and familial sacrifice, struggles with identity, questioning self, and experiences with mentoring. These findings are described within the following five subsections.

Constraints within the organizational culture

A number of the participants expressed constraints in navigating the organizational culture of their educational leadership department. Although examples of individual professors providing helpful information were provided, e.g. alerting them to volunteer tasks that would result in discounted rates for major conferences, there were three organizational constraints that students found particularly vexing.

The first constraint involved developing professional networks and job opportunities, considered key to accessing the complex system that leads to mentoring. Morgan described this as akin to, "Alice trying to figure out how to get through the small door to Wonderland after falling down the rabbit hole." While Morgan, the daughter of an executive school administrator, had some understanding of pursuing a career in educational leadership, she was still overwhelmed by the organizational culture of the department and confused as to how one establishes professional networks within academe. Morgan compared networks within the PhD program to a "secret club or something. And I can't get in. I need a magic key to get in. No matter what I do, it isn't good enough. I can't break through."

A second organizational constraint identified by participants concerned securing stable funding. For example, information on available graduate assistantships and the criteria for selection was unclear; contributing to a competitive and at times, hostile environment. Julie, a single mother of three children, expressed that while she welcomed a competitive process of selection, she also desired more transparency. Other participants agreed with Julie, noting that research job opportunities were rarely announced or posted. Participants expressed that positions seemed to be given to male students who had developed social relationships with their professors via playing basketball or meeting over dinner or drinks outside of the university setting. Female participants felt male students had more opportunities to socialize with the predominantly male faculty that resulted in fruitful connections and opportunities. On the other hand, participants expressed their thankfulness that female students had taken on the role of informal mentors for each other. According to Margaret:

We have learned to look out for each other. Us women. We all search the internet for fellowships and calls for papers and so on. We e-mail them to each other. We read each other's papers ... Our stuff is often rejected because we don't have anyone but each other for guidance. But at least we're not just sitting around complaining ... it's hard not to get discouraged. It's like we're spinning our wheels and going nowhere.

Personal and familial sacrifice

Several participants had children or devoted their time to caring for aging parents. Julie worked full time as an assistant principal while also taking two courses a semester in her PhD program. Julie felt the stressful work and graduate school environment exacerbated strains in her familial life. Julie found her ability to parent was sacrificed. She also expressed concern that her balancing act was evidenced through her

children's behavior at school: "Teachers expressed concern for Kyle and Angela. Kyle was being impish in class, and Angela [was] being snotty and copping an attitude with her teachers." Julie added that personal strain affected her behavior at home. Julie said her kids would "tease" her by saying, "Where is my real mom? You are not my real mom!" She adds, "I was often sharp with them when I got home because I was tired. I would just say to them, 'get out of the room, take a bath, go to bed.'"

Caring for children and/or aging parents, while stressful, was also integral to the women's identities and sense of moral obligation. Thus, it was not viewed as something that could be set aside. This theme was palpable in the comments of first-generation college graduates whose families of origin relied on them for varying degrees of financial support. Despite challenges with family responsibilities, many participants shared that family relationships provided essential support throughout their PhD studies. For example, Maria's adult daughter often proofread Maria's papers and "help[ed] raise" her teenage son. While caring for others sometimes exacerbated imbalances in the women's educational experiences, participants also reported that these caring relationships provided essential affective support. Participants indicated that having mentors, who could serve as "role models," might help them develop strategies for achieving a more "balanced life."

Struggles with identity

Multiple identities – race, ethnicity, age, social class, language, and immigrant status – in addition to gender and marital/family status, contributed additional complexities to participants' doctoral experience. Emma, Julie, and Margaret questioned their identities as "older women." Despite coming into the program with a wealth of experience, knowledge, and skills, each wondered aloud why they seemed to be passed over for research and assistantship opportunities: "What is wrong with me? Is it because I am a woman? Is it because I'm old?" All three expressed feeling as if they were viewed negatively because of their sex, age, and perceived body image. Emma, who avoids disclosing her age, articulated the identity stereotypes placed on her because she is an "older woman" who never married or raised children:

It's different when you are in your 40s and you have other things that pile on. I'm really sensitive about my age. That's why I don't try to broadcast. I could have taken the marrying and having kids route. Maybe something is wrong with me. Maybe I'm not attractive enough.

Emma described being "marked" as a possible "lesbian" and/or "spinster." During the focus group other participants tried to support Emma by reminding her of her many accomplishments and assets, such as speaking multiple languages and working overseas for many years. Even with all her success, however, the uninvited identities seemed to be solidifying as part of Emma's identity.

Chun Hei and Zhen-Zhen, both international students, discussed feelings of isolation, which they attributed to their non-native English speaking status. Zhen-Zhen shared that she often felt her classmates avoided her because she is an international student. She added that if it were not for two particular female classmates who invited her to be a part of their group and welcomed her into their circle of friends, that she would have carried on in "extreme isolation."

Chun Hei and Zhen-Zhen were in separate focus groups, but both described the political and financial complexities of being international students. Zhen-Zhen said,

"I am not qualified for student loans because I am an international student." Similarly, Chun Hei does not have a research assistantship, and without a university position, she has to pay a more expensive international student tuition rate versus the in-state rate guaranteed to international students who are awarded research assistantships. Chun Hei was not afraid to reveal the pain she felt:

I just need to share my agony. I have been searching for a job a long time. The only thing I am qualified for is the Division of Dining Services as a waitress. I am a doctoral student. I do not have a mentor. I need mentorship and networks. I am very lonely. At least if I had a mentor and support I would feel much better. I am feeling isolated like an island. I am glad to share my difficulty.

Chun Hei's island metaphor reflected Zhen-Zhen's experiences of extreme isolation and loneliness; both noting that these feelings have been intense enough for them to consider leaving the program.

As first-generation college graduates, five of 12 participants felt they learned the expectations of the academic world through trial and error. Without family members or peers affiliated with academe and middle-class life, they said they were unaware of the norms of a PhD program. Jasmine often saw her low socioeconomic identity superseding her racial identity in the academic world. She felt out of place in academic settings, not only because she is black, but because she grew up poor. Jasmine said:

Most professors assume that you know something or are connected to something. I feel that most professors come from a privileged background ... I anticipate being judged, and someone is going to look at me and say, "What are you doing here?"

While Jasmine's identities include obvious aspects like race, also present were not-so-obvious personal characteristics. The manifestation of these identities – mostly in the form of lack of cultural capital – seemed omnipresent in her negotiations within academe.

The female graduate students described identity structures that were multi-faceted. Gender was not the sole identity interacting with other experiences in their doctoral program. Because the women themselves presented a complex set of identities, they anticipated instruction in their doctoral program would help them conceptualize what role identity plays in educational leadership. A number of participants expressed entering the program with high expectations for open discussions about race/ethnicity, gender/sexuality, and social class issues. But the participants found that for the most part, their graduate class discussions tended to steer away from real as opposed to theoretical issues of race, poverty, and gender. According to Margaret:

We don't talk about issues. No one is saying, "Hey, what is it like being black [at Central University]?" No one is saying, "Hey what is it like being an international student?"

Morgan also expressed disappointment in the lack of discussion on diversity issues because she desperately needed those discussions to bolster her fieldwork and dissertation writing. Morgan said, "as a white [woman], that would really help me out a lot; I am studying Colonias"[2].

Questioning self

Almost all women expressed feeling that something was wrong with them due to the difficulties they were facing. For example, Jasmine expressed:

When I was facing all these closed doors and feeling invisible, I kept asking myself, “is it because I’m Black? Is it because I grew up poor? Is it because I’m a woman? What is wrong with me? Why don’t professors treat me with respect?” I think being a woman is sometimes harder than being Black.

For Jasmine, the intersections of her identities – black, female, low-income, and first-generation college going – were complex; with a different identity superseding the others in varying contexts and circumstances.

Likewise, Zhen-Zhen and Chun Hei noted that they felt “less than” because they are international students. Regardless of their strengths, they felt they were given short shrift because of perceived cultural and language barriers as well as their gender. Chun Hei questioned:

Is it because I am a woman? Is it because I don’t speak good English? What is wrong with me? Why don’t people think I’m smart or strong?

Zhen-Zhen agreed and noted the tendency of international students to be “left out” of classroom discussions and being asked to join the small groups that are required for completing coursework cooperatively:

Why don’t students want to work with us? Do they think we’re stupid? And the professors don’t say anything!

Experiences with mentoring

Of the 12 respondents, there were striking similarities in students’ impressions of what constitutes a mentor-mentee relationship. The overall portrait depicts a close, trusting, nurturing, and supportive relationship of master-novice whereby the junior scholar learns from the senior scholar such skills as conducting research and writing. Three students noted the importance of the mentor providing critical correction as needed; while two participants viewed learning to navigate the politics and rules of the field as an important component to the mentor relationship. One participant noted:

It depends. I think the “needs” change as the student scholar grows. I am also cognizant of individual differences/needs. Also, I wonder if these definitions would fluctuate according to gender and age.

Two of 12 (17 percent) respondents reported having strong mentoring relationships with dissertation chairs or other professors with whom they conduct research. Six of 12 (50 percent) students expressed that after “working at it” for two to four years, they have either developed informal mentor-mentee relationships with at least one fellow student or professor or have developed a positive, but sometimes limited, relationship with their dissertation chair. Four of 12 (33 percent) participants reported having no formal or informal mentoring relationships now or in the past in their educational leadership doctoral program. Of all participants, nine of 12 (75 percent) believed they need significant increases in the amount and type of mentoring they receive in order to be successful as students and future academicians. Moreover, all participants agreed that mentorship, in some form, needed to begin as soon as one enters a program, which is when many students feel especially vulnerable.

Discussion and implications

The purposes of our research included developing a better understanding of the lived experiences and perceived needs of female doctoral students in educational leadership programs and exploring their understanding of mentorship. Our findings revealed the positive and negative impacts that organizational culture, relationships, identity and confidence had on their experiences as doctoral students as well as their perceptions of the importance of mentoring.

The notion that gender mattered to our participants was clear. Whether they were talking about their experiences at home or the university they articulated the “othering” they felt as women in a professional field with a strong male-centric culture (Acker and Armenti, 2004). The female doctoral students reported noteworthy differences with regard to access and inclusion for men and women students, reporting that the differences led to stronger professional networks and job preparation for men. Importantly, female doctoral students shared that gender was not the single identity marker influencing their experiences in their doctoral studies. Nine of the twelve women reported instances in which the intersection of race, class, sexuality, age, national origin, and/or language within their personal identity were perceived by others as deficits rather than resources even though multicultural identities are purported to be an asset and “diversity” is professed as an aim of most modern organizations (Acker, 1992; Alvesson and Billing, 1997; Cox, 2001; Gherardi, 1995; Schein, 2004; Scott and Davis, 2007).

Taken together these findings have implications for the ways that educational leadership departments might support the educational and professional experiences of female graduate students. First, it is important that faculty members take a deep interest in the experiences of their students and the organizational culture they are helping to foster. It is likely that most faculty are so immersed in the culture of the department that it is difficult to see outside of it, unless prompted to do so (Acker, 1992). Thus in addition to assessing their organizational culture, department faculty might also consider fostering discussions around identity and difference with the intention of developing greater awareness and understanding among students and faculty.

Once faculty are more aware of student needs and how those needs are impacted by organizational culture, our findings suggest that strategies be put in place to enable students to learn from and support one another. The students found a great deal of comfort and support from their colleagues. If supported further by faculty guidance, such informal mentoring groups could be more effective. However, mentoring should not end with peer mentoring groups. The importance of formal faculty-student mentoring was emphasized by the students in our study and is supported by the research literature on graduate student success (Dixon-Reeves, 2003; Edwards-Alexander, 2005; Jaschik, 2006). Educational leadership departments can collaborate with external professional organizations to maximize resources and broaden the informal and formal networks female students need to build greater capacity.

Finally, our findings indicate the importance of transparency and reflectivity. Making the implicit rules of success in graduate school explicit and ensuring transparency around scholarships, fellowships and job opportunities would go a long way in addressing, and possibly ameliorating, the feelings of insecurity and

marginalization experienced by many women graduate students. Lack of university funding and collaborative research opportunities had negative effects on participants' personal wellbeing and created unease concerning future academic employment. While universities may be strained in the present economy, educational leadership departments can create transparent processes for awarding vacant appointments.

Future research and conclusion

While a limitation of the present study is its small sample size, the results are presently being used to develop a survey to reach a larger sample of male and female doctoral students world-wide. Increasing the scope of our study will enable us to better gauge what is currently happening in other educational leadership departments and will answer the call in the literature for additional research on mentoring female graduate students generally, and moving beyond the use of small, narrow samples specifically (Paglis *et al.*, 2006; Rayle *et al.*, 2006).

Another area ripe for investigation is the detailed examination of the gendered subcultures of educational leadership departments (Acker, 1992). It is one thing to document inequities, and quite another to examine why inequities persist. A deeper inquiry and analysis utilizing feminist – in conjunction with traditional – organization theories might help explain the persistent state of affairs and contribute a trend toward more holistic thinking that rejects the male-female dichotomy in favor of viewing organizational citizenship as interdependent; “[recasting] gender practices as dual presence, intersections, and reciprocity” (Gherardi, 1995, p. 4).

We conclude in the company of Rhode (2003) and Campbell (2002) that educational institutions must take responsibility for creating the organizational structures conducive to inspiring and equipping women to succeed as students and professionals. Professional schools, like colleges of education, have a particular obligation to communicate the importance of diversity and act as exemplars in creating strategies to achieve it. Increasing the number and success of female leaders and scholars in academe – and educational leadership in particular – is essential to ensuring these organizations not only reflect the diversity of the field and society, but also to develop and benefit from the talent and contributions that both men and women scholars bring to the field.

Notes

1. Given the variety of department and program titles, we use the term “educational leadership department” to refer to a variety of different departmental configurations that include educational leadership programs, as well as programs like educational policy.
2. Colonias can be found in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. The Office of the Secretary of State defines a “colonia” as a residential area along the Mexico border that may lack some basic living necessities, such as potable water and sewer systems, electricity, paved roads, and safe and sanitary housing.

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