

Exploring Doctoral Students' Integration Experiences into a PhD Program Using Photovoice

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Abstract

Embarking on a doctoral journey is a process that may require adaptation to the unfamiliar environment of academia to succeed and complete. The Ph.D. completion rates in the U.S. are alarming which brings out the importance of doctoral students' lived experiences. Departing from this point, the researchers sought to explore the lived experiences of doctoral students during their transition into a Ph.D. program. The intent of this study was to obtain a deep and meaningful understanding of the reality of doctoral student experiences with integration process through the participatory action research. By doing so, the insights obtained may be used later on to create an environment that positions doctoral students for success. In this study, we used the photovoice methodology to tap into academic lives of doctoral students to explore their perceptions of the integration process into the Ph.D. program. The rationale for using photovoice is to encourage collaborative sharing of experiences between the participants. The study addresses the following research question: "How do doctoral students experience integration into a Ph.D. program?" In this study, we asked doctoral students to take a photo representing how they personally experienced the process of integration to the doctoral program. After the pictures were taken, participants were asked to reflect and share their pictures in- group, explaining to other participants what was happening in the photo and what it represented. In addition to the in-group sharing and telling the story of the photo, we asked participants to provide a narrative explaining their pictures. The process of analyzing the data consisted of thematic analysis of the narratives completed by the photographs.

Keywords: Photovoice, Doctoral Students, Integration, Action Research;

Background

The PhD completion rate in the USA is around 57% according to the Council of Graduate Schools (2008) [1]. The attrition rates vary across disciplines with humanities and social sciences having the highest attrition rates [2]. There are multiple factors that play a role in attrition rates such as financial strains, lack of social and academic support, having difficulty in adapting to the new academic environment. Therefore, it is important to understand first year experiences of doctoral students to create proper support systems to ease their integration in the program. This study aims to explore the experiences of doctoral students during their first year in the doctoral program.

Methodology

The researchers chose photovoice as the data collection method using an arts-based research design. Photovoice combines photography with participatory methods [3] in which participants engage in group discussion and use photography to document their experiences [4].

This study was conducted at a private university in the southern region of the USA. Using a purposeful sampling, we recruited fourteen students who met the criteria of being in a doctoral program in education for at least one year and volunteered to participate in the study.

In the beginning of the data collection phase, we explained what photovoice is and how it is used. After this briefing, we asked each participant to take pictures representing their experiences during their first year in the program. After taking pictures, participants gathered together to discuss their photos. In guiding the discussion, we used the PHOTO technique described by Amos, Read, Cobb, & Pabani [5] by modifying them according to our research question. At the end of the discussion, participants individually wrote a narrative, answering each of the questions used in the discussion that are listed below:

P: Describe your **photo**

H: What is **happening** in your picture?

O: Why did you take a picture **of** this?

T: What does this picture **tell** us about how you integrated into the program?

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O: How can this picture provide **opportunities** to improve the integration process?

The data of this study consisted of photographs taken by the participants and narratives explaining the photographs. In analyzing the written data, we used thematic analysis and used the photographs to complement the thematic analysis. We started the data analysis by completing an open-coding first and compared our codes to see if there were any differences. Then, we grouped the codes into broader concepts and categories followed by identifying possible dimensions of these concepts [6, 7] (See Figure 1).

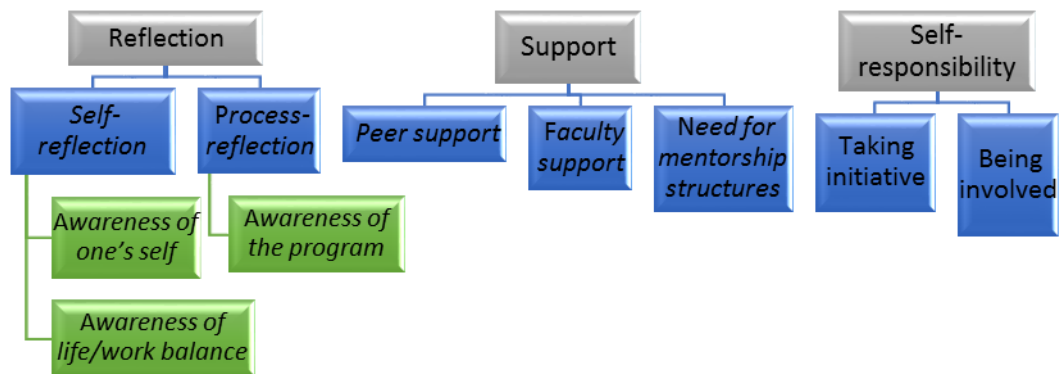


Figure 1. Categories emerged from the data.

Results and Discussion

Self-Awareness

It was prominent in the data that photovoice allowed participants to reflect on their experiences deeply which resulted in participants becoming more aware of how they integrated into the program. While some participants reflected on the process, some reflected on their development over time.

"... we all had trials... we were able to push through and still be here today" and adds, "I also saw the growth and transformation process in other people's stories and realized my own from when I started to now." (Nora)

Carlos' statement (Fig. 2) speaks to maturation or development over time. Students go through multiple stages in a doctoral program and each stage has its own challenges and requirements [8].

"In the beginning of the program, we were new, confused, and not sure if we have taken the right decision, so this is one stage of the integration process. Another stage is the coursework stage when students have to deal with different professors, students, and courses...We should think about the integration process from all different stages." (Drew)

Reflecting on self, led participants to increase awareness of self within the journey. Students realized how they were able to overcome the obstacles they ran into, and how much they have grown throughout the program.

"Semester after semester the unknown have changed to known gradually." (Mary)



Figure 2. Carlos' photo - the trunk of the tree. But the program I have begun as well as my thought

Tree: *"I was very singular similar to as I have navigated through the branch out and expand as a person process and critical thinking."*

Support

By starting a doctoral program, students are not only trying to integrate into the program but also adapt to a new phase in their lives. Having a support system is one of the important components for successful integration. Participants talked about various forms of support; *peer support*, *faculty support*, and *mentorship*. Although the PhD journey is personal, participants expressed the need for support to take this journey. Veronica illustrated this with the photo of the full moon, partly hidden behind the branches and leaves of trees (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Veronica's photo – journey is personal and unique to students, we all need some sort of leaves in the pictures being so and creating a blanket also or togetherness."

Togetherness: *"Although a PhD every single one of us as PhD support throughout. And the close and touching each other, represent the sense of community"*

Participants highlighted the need of faculty support in their integration. According to some participants the integration should consist of students taking the initial efforts and faculty members helping them with the integration. For example, Ken highlights this need by saying:

"...If I made the initial efforts I did, but did not find a supportive or welcoming environment, then it would have been demoralizing and negatively affected my integration."

Support from faculty members is vital for doctoral students and it can be offered either in an advisor role or a mentor role. Mentorship involves personal and professional guidance in addition to advising role. Nora specifically talks about the mentorship she received during her first year in the program which impacted her integration positively:

"Dr. X was the first professor I had in the doctoral program. We shared many common interests and common ground and she really took the time to get to know me and took me under her wing as her mentee. She showed me the ropes as far as what my future plans might look like...No other professor has ever showed so much care and interest in my performance and success before and I just felt supported and at home with Dr. X's guidance."

Students should understand their responsibility to be motivated and be willing to take the steps to express and establish relationships to receive support. Successful integration is the combination of

having some sort of support from peers, faculty members and initial responsibility of students. John spoke to the importance of self-responsibility:

“...at the end of the day, earning a PhD isn’t a team sport. The support and help of our peers is important to success, but it’s a journey one must take on their own, under their own power. Like climbing stairs, though, it’s something you must do at your own pace”.

Figure 4. John’s photo represents the program; you know it’s challenge, you’ll be want to stop. There’s stairs so others can get there you’ll have to power. The light milestones along the destination, but points take a breath, see how know that you’re



- Staircase: *“This beginning of the PhD going to be a wearied at times and enough room on the climb with you, but to do it under your own represents the way-they aren’t the at which you can far you’ve come, and closer to the top.”*

Understanding what steps participants had to take to integrate into the program shows moments when students are migrating within the program to successfully integrate with it. When reflecting on their experiences, taking initiative was a common factor. For Veronica the integration process consisted of hard-work and taking initiative:

“I took the initiative to build relationships and try to be helpful in and to the community. This photo voice exercise indeed voiced my hidden thoughts or perceptions that I was not aware of having. I worked hard and put so much effort to become a part of the program and the doctoral community”

Conclusion

Completing a doctoral degree is a lengthy and challenging process. One of the reasons for high attrition rates is the first-year experiences of doctoral students where they try to adapt to a new environment and their new roles as PhD students. The results of this study revealed that it is important for students to reflect on the lived experiences as they progress through the program. Additionally, students need various forms of support from peers, faculty members, and their families that would position them for success in the program. While students need support from people in their academic and social circle, this support alone is not sufficient. Students should also be aware of their role in the process by taking the necessary steps to establish relationships and immerse themselves in the process to ease their integration into the program. Overall, integration requires collaborative efforts from multiple actors. Higher education institutions should create a supportive environment by implementing support structures for students. In creating support systems, higher education leaders can involve students in the process. For this purpose, further studies with an action research approach might be beneficial to design and pilot programs as each institution has unique cultures and student demographics.

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