



**DEVELOPING CARE AND SOCIO-EMOTIONAL LEARNING
IN FIRST YEAR DOCTORAL STUDENTS:
BUILDING CAPACITY FOR SUCCESS**

Carol Rogers-Shaw*	Pennsylvania State University, State College, Pennsylvania, USA	car348@psu.edu
Davin Carr-Chellman	University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho, USA	dcarrchellman@uidaho.edu

* Corresponding author

ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	The purpose of this research is to explore and describe the role of care and socio-emotional learning in the first year of doctoral study. In particular, understanding the nature of the caring relationships doctoral students experience and their development of effective socio-emotional capacity are the primary foci of this study. It may provide institutions with data necessary to add specific supports to graduate orientation programs and/or introductory doctoral courses that will mitigate problems these beginning students face and lead to greater success and quality of life.
Background	This study examines the caring relationships of students in two education doctoral programs using the features of socio-emotional learning (SEL), the ethics of care, and learning care to understand the effects of caring relationships on first year doctoral students and to explore how their subsequent use of socio-emotional skills impacts success and quality of life.
Methodology	The study used a phenomenological methodology focusing on the initial experiences of returning adult doctoral students in the field of education during the first semester of their studies. A total of seven students from two different cohorts of Ph. D. and Ed. D. programs were interviewed. A deductive process was subsequently pursued, applying the central concepts of care and socio-emotional learning to the data as categories, resulting in the findings of this study.

Accepted by Editor David Kahl Jr. | Received: January 25, 2018 | Revised: April 2, 2018 | Accepted: May 25, 2018.

Cite as: Rogers-Shaw, C., & Carr-Chellman, D. (2018). Developing care and socio-emotional learning in first year doctoral students: Building capacity for success. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 13, 233-252.

<https://doi.org/10.28945/4064>

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Developing Care and Socio-Emotional Learning

Contribution	As the importance of care is often trivialized, particularly in the most advanced levels of education, it is important for doctoral programs to examine what can be done to enhance relationship-building in order to increase student success and quality of life. This study calls for more attention to care in doctoral study.
Findings	Participant responses identified self-awareness as key to how they managed stress, maintained motivation and academic discipline, organized their time in order to accomplish tasks and meet responsibilities, and set goals. Participants attributed their academic discipline and ability to handle stress to perseverance, drive, and work ethic. These doctoral students were very conscious of the decisions they made and the reasons behind these decisions. In their discussion of the relationships that supported them throughout their study, they clearly identified emotions triggered by these relationships, and they discussed how those who cared for them helped them to recognize their own strengths and gain more self-confidence. The presence of caring was clear as participants' reasons for engaging in doctoral study were often rooted in their care for others in their family and their caring about marginalized populations in society.
Recommendations for Practitioners	Examining the nature of the care doctoral students receive and their development of effective socio-emotional abilities may provide institutions with data necessary to add specific supports to graduate orientation programs and/or introductory doctoral courses that will mitigate problems these beginning students face, leading to future success.
Recommendation for Researchers	While most research and instruction involving socio-emotional learning has focused on K-12 learners, this study investigates how the experiences of doctoral students reflect the importance of addressing the emotional side of learning at all levels of education. Despite the plethora of extant literature concerning doctoral student experiences related to socialization, the significance of socio-emotional learning, and the importance of care as a facilitator of learning, there are gaps in the literature connecting doctoral students in the first stages of their studies to affective learning. This study will fill that gap and opens the door to future qualitative studies, elaborating the lived experiences of caring relationships and socio-emotional learning. Additionally, these initial qualitative studies provide direction to quantitative researchers looking for ways to measure these concepts.
Impact on Society	Elements of care, especially as they relate to socio-emotional learning correlate strongly with successful outcomes in educational contexts. To the extent that doctoral students and doctoral programs experience greater success and increased satisfaction and quality of life, this research will have significant societal impact.
Future Research	As a qualitative study using inductive and deductive approaches, it is important for future research to translate the themes and concepts of this study into measurable, quantifiable, and replicable units. This translation will facilitate the generalizability of our findings. The application of the concepts of care and socio-emotional learning to first year doctoral students opens the door to additional qualitative approaches as well, which will greatly increase our understanding of what these concepts mean as they are lived-out.
Keywords	doctoral study, socio-emotional learning, ethics of care, learning care

INTRODUCTION

As research into human learning increases the academy's capacity for facilitating academic success, the limitations of the traditional developmental approach to doctoral student preparation become more prominent (Pallas, 2001). The unique demands of doctoral study and the evolving expectations of future scholars call for a better integration of improved models of learning and researcher preparation. A fuller understanding of the role of care and socio-emotional learning in the success of first year doctoral students provides an important move in this direction. As such, we sought to explore the following research questions: (1) How does care, both informal and formal, support learning in doctoral students? (2) How does the relational aspect of teaching and learning present itself in doctoral study? (3) What characteristics of socio-emotional learning are visible in doctoral students and how does student use of these traits contribute to success?

In understanding the effects of care on first year doctoral students and exploring how their use of socio-emotional skills increases success, the traditional model of doctoral student preparation can be improved. This study contributes evidence that caring relationships can provide the support needed for first year doctoral students to achieve success and that the foundation upon which these relationships are built is socio-emotional learning (SEL). Examining the nature of the care doctoral students receive and their development of effective socio-emotional abilities may provide institutions with data necessary to add specific supports to graduate orientation programs and/or introductory doctoral courses that will mitigate problems these beginning students face and lead to future success.

Elias (2003) defined socio-emotional learning (SEL) skills as "a set of abilities that allows students to work with others, learn effectively, and serve essential roles in their families, communities and places of work" (p. 3). SEL demands caring, teaching life-skills, using goal setting and varied instructional techniques, and increasing empathy through participation in the community (Elias, 2003). Elias (2006) argued that "social and emotional learning (SEL) is the capacity to recognize and manage emotions, solve problems effectively, and establish positive relationships with others, competencies that clearly are essential for all students" (p. 234). While most research and instruction involving SEL has focused on K-12 learners, this study investigates how the experiences of doctoral students reflect the importance of addressing the emotional side of learning at all levels of education.

In her work in the area of care in education, Noddings (1988, 2002, 2005) suggested that caring relationships between teachers and students are essential. She combined elements of agapism and contemporary feminism in developing her notion of the ethics of care and argued for an alternative approach to teaching and learning that focused on trusting relationships built over time (1988). She claimed:

[U]niversity educators and researchers are part of the problem. Our endless focus on narrow achievement goals, our obsession with sophisticated schemes of evaluation and measurement directed (naturally enough) at things that are relatively easy to measure, our reinforcement of the mad desire to be number one - to compete, to win awards, to acquire more and more of whatever is currently valued - in all these ways we contribute to the proliferation of problems and malaise. (Noddings, 1988, p. 226)

This study examines the caring relationships of students in two education doctoral programs, supporting Noddings' position on the importance of care in education, including at the highest level.

Feeley's (2010, 2014) work on learning care in literacy instruction highlights the importance of care in supporting learning as she argued that "learning care' is not some kind of nebulous good intent but rather a skillful, respectful, empowering approach to facilitating learning.... [and] affective aspects of learning are not incidental but rather a central and consistent element of the learning process" (p. 10-11). This study explores how caring facilitated learning in first semester doctoral students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inspired by Pallas' (2001) critique of traditional doctoral student preparation, the researchers conducted a review of research literature in several areas, examining characteristics of doctoral programs that lead to student success. One goal of doctoral programs is to socialize students into academia as they prepare students to become researchers and faculty members. A significant element of socialization is the development of supportive relationships. In examining these relationships, we focused on the socio-emotional skills that enhance personal interactions, for example, self-awareness, respect, and solidarity. Beginning with this framework, we delved further into the theoretical realm beginning with Noddings' ethics of care that more specifically related to education. Finally, we examined specific applications of care in education such as Feeley's learning care. We chose these four areas for our literature investigation because of their link to interpersonal relationships as a key factor in doctoral student success.

DOCTORAL STUDENT SOCIALIZATION AND SUPPORT

The connection between the socialization process of doctoral students and their development of an academic identity is important; in order to successfully transition from student to faculty member, doctoral students rely on mentoring relationships with their professors (Austin, 2002; Barnes & Austin, 2009; Fagen & Suedkamp Wells, 2004; Golde, 2000; Weidman & Stein, 2003; Zhao, Golde, & McCormick, 2007). Establishing positive relationships with advisors requires socio-emotional skills that enhance the affective learning of doctoral students who need more than content knowledge to be successful members of the professoriate. Students must learn to move away from the dependence and uncertainty experienced as beginning students toward the self motivation, direction, awareness, and management of faculty members in order to become part of an academic community (Gardner, 2007, 2008, 2010; McAlpine, Jazvac-Martek, & Hopwood, 2009; O'Meara, Knudsen, & Jones, 2013).

Family, friends, cohort members, and institutional services provide additional support for doctoral students overcoming challenges (Byers et al., 2014; Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Jimenez y West, Gokalp, Vallejo Pena, Fischer, & Gupton, 2011; Martinez, Ordu, Della Sala, & McFarlane, 2013; Sturhahn Stratton, Mickle, Kirshenbaum, Goodrich, & McRae, 2006; Sweitzer, 2009;) as they manage the demands of study, work, social activities, and personal health. Again, caring relationships provide the basis for this support.

SOCIO-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Elias (2003, 2006; Elias et. al., 1997) called for balancing instruction by attending to not only the academic needs of learners but also addressing their socio-emotional learning through nine practical applications. The significance of socio-emotional learning to this study are the SEL skills that enhance caring relationships. The five core competencies of SEL include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Not only does the specific category of relationship skills apply to care in doctoral study as students seek supportive interactions with peers and advisors, but several traits within the other competencies such as understanding one's emotions, being able to acknowledge the perspectives of others, expressing empathy, and showing respect also enhance relationship building (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2017).

Järvelä, Volet, and Jarvenoja (2010) argued that the social aspect of collaborative learning is important, while Sinclair, Barnacle, and Cuthbert (2013) stressed the cognitive domain as it enhances collaboration and engagement in research. Doctoral students often need to work collaboratively in their courses and on research projects; they need to communicate and effectively engage with teammates in these endeavors, actions supported by socio-emotional skills that enhance their relationships. Several studies examined the connection between affective learning with motivation (Kim, Park, & Cozart, 2014) and resiliency (Hall, Spruill, & Webster, 2002). Self-motivation is a significant

feature of SEL, and doctoral students also need to recognize their own strengths, set goals based on those accurate self-perceptions, analyze problems, and propose solutions in order to overcome obstacles.

Researchers documented the importance of SEL in higher education (Kasworm, 2008; Vandervoort, 2006) where social support contributes to the success of graduate students (Tompkins, Brecht, Tucker, Neander, & Swift 2016). Social support is visible in the form of student relationships with family, peers, and faculty who care about the success of the students. Attention to SEL “assists students in their transition to Higher Education, reduce[s] withdrawal rates and significantly enhances the student learning experience” (Devis-Rozental, Eccles, Mayer, & Jones, 2014); it also affects students’ writing, an emotional skill as well as a cognitive one (Wellington, 2010). In post-secondary education, the “nature of the relationships at the center of the doctoral experience, and the ways faculty and doctoral students interact” (O’Meara et al., 2013) is determined by many SEL factors, and recognizing how these relationships provide necessary resources that contribute to higher achievement is an important skill for doctoral students to develop.

The emotions of affective learning are significant in adult education (Aguilar, 2014; Dirkx, 1997, 2001; Turillo & Tanner, 2014) as adult learners bring their lived experiences to the classroom. Dirkx and Espinoza (2017) argued that emotion is cognitive as well as expressive. The life experiences of doctoral students contribute to their social awareness and assist them in building meaningful relationships, which in turn influence their academic learning. This type of learning experience is present in distance education as well (Baker, 2010; Delahunty, Verenikina, & Jones, 2014; Xiao, 2012) where effective online instruction enhances student interaction and builds a sense of community. Rossiter’s (1999) phenomenological study was designed “to explore and explicate the experience of caring as it relates to graduate education from the perspective of the adult learner” (p. 205).

THE ETHICS OF CARE

In her seminal work, “An Ethic of Caring and Its Implications for Instructional Arrangements,” Noddings (1988) defined the ethic of care and argued that caring, “both as a moral orientation to teaching and as an aim of moral education” (p. 215) is essential. Noddings (2002, 2013) offered the ethics of care as a relational alternative to contemporary notions of individualized character education.

Based on Noddings’ idea that teaching is relational (2007, 2012), it is important to consider the ethics of care in doctoral study where the role of the instructor is not traditionally considered from the point of view of caring; the professorial position is more often viewed as a power position of imparting content knowledge. However, graduate students view teaching as relational rather than merely a method for transferring content (Hill, 2014). Establishing caring relationships with students can offer instructors the opportunity to foster student success, impart a sense of professionalism, provide leadership, and encourage service (Bozalek et al., 2014; Hugman, 2014; Noddings, 2006a; Trout, 2012). Currently, the traditional faculty/student relationship in graduate study is often counter to Noddings’ (2006b) beliefs that emphasize the importance of including social, emotional, and ethical learning in all aspects of schooling.

However, there is a need for the ethics of care in advanced study. From her study on students at a community college, Barrow (2015) concluded that “[d]eveloping relationships that support college student success is key to establishing a caring environment in which both student and instructor can thrive” (p. 57) despite the difficulties establishing such relationships. Care is particularly important in mentoring relationships (Corwin, Cohen, Ciechanowski, & Orozco, 2012; Hansman, 2003; Harris, 2016; Johnson & Huwe, 2002; McGuire & Reger, 2003), both formal and organic. A caring relationship can positively influence the power dynamics in a graduate mentoring relationship.

LEARNING CARE

In her work on literacy that drew on previous work by Lynch and McLaughlin (1995), Feeley's (2014) argument supports the notion that care should be examined in doctoral study as it affects the "capacity to absorb and retain new knowledge and skills" (p. 160). The volume of new knowledge that must be consumed in graduate work is significant and often evokes anxiety and frustration in learners, so if maintaining caring relationships "allows us to enter hopefully and confidently into learning situations" (Feeley, 2006, p. 160), it is an important factor in student achievement. Feeley's (2006) work in adult literacy described deficits that developed in learners whose educational circumstances lacked care. The inclusion of care in doctoral study then becomes an issue of social justice (Held, 1995, 2006; Lynch, Baker, & Lyons, 2009) and just as SEL is vital for effective development for diverse students, not just the dominant population (Hoffman, 2009; Zins, & Elias, 2007), caring relationships increase the chance for these students to find success in doctoral study. Student perceptions of the effects of teacher caring on learning (Teven & McCroskey, 1997) support this notion, as does work focused on the views of teachers (Carnell, 2007).

Conventionally, the affective domain has not played a significant role in formal education (Lynch, Lyons, & Cantillon, 2007), yet there have been calls for its inclusion to improve the climate of educational environments (Cohen, 2006). The stressful circumstances of doctoral study may be ameliorated by the presence of care, especially if teaching and learning are viewed as emotional practices in graduate study (Hargreaves, 2000, 2001, 2005).

Several previous studies have reviewed the gendered nature of care and the perception that affective aspects of education occur naturally (Drudy, 2008; Gannerud, 2001; Sarikakis, 2003). As the academy has traditionally been male-dominated, conventional teaching practices should be examined as increasing numbers of female students pursue doctoral degrees. Understanding that care is not necessarily gendered, but can be effectively learned and developed in teaching techniques, reflects the need to examine standard teaching methods in doctoral programs. Theories of care call for relational responsibility where both students and faculty members have a responsibility to build caring relationships through a reflective process (Hermsen & Embregts, 2015; McLeod, 2015).

Despite the plethora of extant literature concerning doctoral student experiences related to socialization, the significance of socio-emotional learning, and the importance of care as a facilitator of learning, there are gaps in the literature connecting doctoral students in the first stage of their studies to affective learning. This study will fill that gap.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a phenomenological methodology based on the work of Moustakas (1994), Van Manen (1997), and Baptiste (2008). It represents original qualitative research focusing on the initial experiences of returning adult doctoral students in the field of education during the first semester of their studies. As an investigation of two different cohorts of Ph. D. and Ed. D. students, the research offers insights into the experiences of both scholarly and professional program students, as well as full-time and part-time students.

We conducted seven semi-structured interviews of 60-90 minutes. A single interview of each participant was audio-recorded and transcribed. The sample size was 14 potential subjects from two different doctoral programs. With seven students participating in the study, our response rate was 50 percent.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions included the following: (1) How does care, both informal and formal, support learning in doctoral students? (2) How does the relational aspect of teaching and learning present itself in doctoral study? (3) What characteristics of socio-emotional learning are visible in doctoral

students and how does student use of these traits contribute to success? Table 1 presents the specific questions asked during the interviews.

Table 1. Interview Questions

Interview Questions	Prompts to Elicit Richer, More In-Depth Responses
1. Tell me a little about your personal, educational, and professional background.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. parental attitudes about important topics b. quality of relationships c. purpose of significant activities, e.g. school/area of study choices, job choices, lifestyle choices
2. How did you become a person interested in doctoral study?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. meaningful events that occurred b. goals c. dissatisfaction with status quo d. students you interacted with e. children f. prior professional experiences g. future effect of doctorate on career
3. Tell me about your life/typical day outside of your work and school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. family, friends b. recreation, hobbies, outside interests, free time
4. How did your doctoral study affect your typical day?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. work, class, personal, study
5. How would you describe your personal and professional relationships inside and outside the doctoral program at this point?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. changes/consistency, reasons for changes, reasons for consistencies b. supportive ones vs. unsupportive ones c. conversations about your studies with those inside and outside the program
6. Given your life before entering a doctoral program and your life at this point in the doctoral program, how would you characterize yourself as a student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. the same person now as you were in August or different b. reasons for changes and lack of change c. value of first semester experience d. initial thoughts and feelings e. final thoughts and feelings
7. What makes for a good student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. k-12 classroom, undergraduate, doctoral

Interview Questions	Prompts to Elicit Richer, More In-Depth Responses
8. What were some of your successes? What personal traits, skills, and people did you rely on to find success?	a. excitement at the start of the program b. participation in class, reading assignments, writing assignments, projects c. study time d. areas of strength that brought confidence
9. What were some of your failures/struggles? What personal traits, skills, and people did you rely on to support you as you faced these challenges?	a. anxiety at the start of the program b. participation in class, reading assignments, writing assignments, projects c. study time d. areas of concern that caused worry

RESEARCH SITE & PARTICIPANTS

Seven first year returning adult doctoral students studying education were interviewed. The two institutions the students attended were from different Northeastern locations in the United States. Focusing on first semester experiences allowed a vision of a distinctly challenging and understudied time period in doctoral studies. The participants were a diverse group that revealed that students from different backgrounds had varied experiences, reflecting their own subjectivities in relation to doctoral study.

PARTICIPANT BIOGRAPHIES

Pam, Melissa, Debbie, and Linda were part-time students; Susan, Lynn, and Shelly studied full-time. Pam, Melissa, and Debbie attended a small private college and were studying Educational Leadership in a three-year professional cohort program. Linda, Susan, Lynn, and Shelly were in an Adult Education program at a large research university.

CODING PROCESS

Initially the transcripts were examined inductively using interpretive phenomenological analysis (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Moustakas, 1994). Hand coding revealed 19 potential areas to explore. Topics related to learning care included: serving others, social justice, family support, academic community, outside community, relationships, measuring success, mentoring, and frustration. Further analysis identified the emergent themes of promoting social justice by helping others, benefitting from supportive relationships within the academic community, and maintaining personal relationships that provided support (Carr-Chellman & Rogers-Shaw, 2017).

The goal of interpretive, or hermeneutical, phenomenology is to describe the essence of an experience through the interpretation of texts, including human actions, expressions, or any observable human phenomenon. Interpretive phenomenology emphasizes the role of the researcher as instrument and interpreter, demonstrating a stronger Heideggerian influence, more so than traditional phenomenology's more Husserlian emphasis on bracketing. In this way, intentionality, situatedness, reflexivity, and interpretation are the primary tools for accessing and describing the essence of an experience. Following Moustakas (1994), we sought to transform the lived experience of our participants into a textual expression of its essence using several specific steps. Our inductive process was

driven by constant comparative analysis through which emergent themes are recognized in the data and evolve as the phenomenological analysis proceeds. In following Moustakas' basic approach, our steps included horizontalization, thematizing, and composite textural and structural description.

The characteristics of socio-emotional learning, the elements of the ethics of care, and learning care features were then deductively applied to the transcripts using Quirkos, a qualitative analysis software program. The initial codes included: self-awareness (identifying emotions, accurate self-perception, recognizing strengths, self-confidence, self-efficacy); social awareness (perspective-taking, empathy, appreciating diversity, respect for others); responsible decision-making (identifying problems, analyzing situations, solving problems, evaluating, reflecting, ethical responsibility); self-management (impulse control, stress management, self-discipline, self-motivation, goal setting, organizational skills); relationship skills (communication, social engagement, relationship building, teamwork) (CASEL, 2017); cared for, caring for and caring about; receptive attention and reciprocity; modelling; dialogue; practice; confirmation (Smith, 2004, 2016); respect, recognition and representation; power; resources; and solidarity and relationships (Feeley, 2014). During the iterative process of analysis, some code categories were merged as it became apparent that there was significant overlap and little distinction in the interpretation between individual categories such as relationship skills and solidarity and relationships or caring about and social awareness. Coding focused on the larger category levels such as self-awareness rather than the sub-categories like identifying emotions or accurate self-perception. Future analysis should delve deeper into breaking the larger themes into smaller units of study.

THE EXPERIENCE OF USING QUIRKOS IN DEDUCTIVE ANALYSIS

Quirkos is a software package that “allows users to code, retrieve and manage data from large text-based qualitative sources, with findings delivered in a visual format” (Bainbridge, 2014, para. 1). It was designed by Daniel Turner in 2014, and it uses “live visualisations of the themes that develop as researchers work, creating visual reports in the form of an interactive ‘bubble graph’ to make qual data more engaging and easier to understand” (Bainbridge, 2014, para. 3). The bubbles, or quirks, increase in size as more text is highlighted and dragged to that category so it is easy to recognize the most significant themes as they emerge. The program also provides a view of theme clusters that reveal the links between the themes (Turner, 2016).

As qualitative researchers who are comfortable hand-coding through the use of color highlighting, spreadsheets, and charts, we found the experience of using Quirkos positive. Because we were using a deductive process to review data we had previously analyzed inductively, we had a set of themes with which to examine the interview transcripts. We used the characteristics of socio-emotional learning, the ethics of care, and learning care traits. It was simple to set these elements as the thematic quirks, import the interview transcripts, and begin highlighting the text and dragging it to the appropriate bubble. It was easy to identify the themes that were more prevalent and those that overlapped.

RESULTS

As seen in Figures 1 and 2, the most prevalent themes included self-awareness and solidarity/relationships, followed by self-management. Social awareness, responsible decision-making, respect/recognition/representation and confirmation were themes in the next level of frequency.

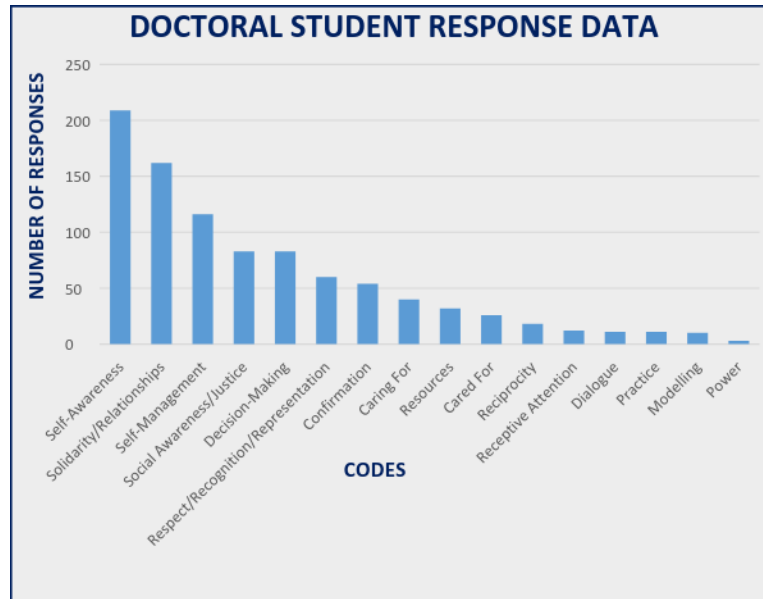


Figure 1. Graph of Deductive Themes

Initially the data was coded using categories of relationship skills that included communication, social engagement, relationship building, teamwork and solidarity/relationships. As it became clear that quotes from one category also fit in other groups, these quirks, or themes, were combined, making solidarity/relationships one of the larger topics. The same situation emerged with the codes for social awareness that originally separated perspective-taking, empathy, appreciating diversity, respect for others, and caring about that included social justice, but was later combined. Further analysis should examine these categories more closely, looking for more precise differentiation between the sub-categories.

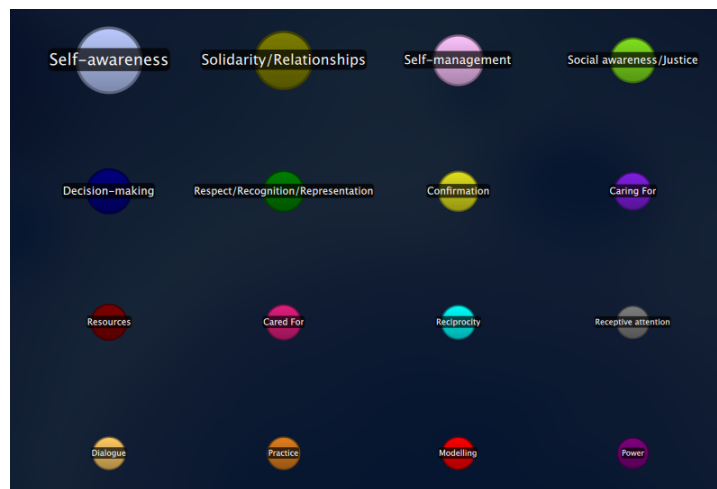


Figure 2. Quirk View of Deductive Themes

OVERLAP OF THEMES

As seen in Figures 3 and 4, there was also significant overlap between several themes. For example, responses identified as self-awareness, one of the most significant themes, included quotations that also fit the themes of self-management, solidarity/relationships, decision-making, and respect/recognition/representation. Participant statements that recognized their strengths and weaknesses often related to self-management as they discussed how they managed stress, how they main-

tained motivation and academic discipline, how they organized their time in order to accomplish tasks and meet responsibilities and how they set goals.



Figure 3. Overlapping of Self-Awareness Quirks/Themes

The second major category, solidarity/relationships, also included appreciable overlap with self-awareness, confirmation, reciprocity, self-management, respect/recognition/representation, and caring for. While the links between relationships and self-awareness were discussed, additional connections are important.



Figure 4. Overlapping of Solidarity/Relationships Quirks/Themes

CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIO-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

For our participants, the characteristics of SEL that resonated most with them in terms of their success during the first year of doctoral studies included self-awareness, solidarity and relationships, self-management, social awareness and social justice, decision-making, and respect, recognition, and representation. These characteristics contributed to their success as they were able to draw on their

strengths, seek support to overcome weaknesses, and pursue their goals of enhancing helping careers while studying on the doctoral level.

DISCUSSION

Building capacity for success during the first year of doctoral study involves the cultivation of care in several key relationships as well as the development of socio-emotional learning. Our analysis of the data revealed prominent themes, but also significant overlap between several of those themes. This overlap is best expressed in our discussion through the characteristics and qualities of care and socio-emotional learning. More specifically, this discussion translates our results into key notions of care and central concepts of socio-emotional learning through the words of our participants.

MOTIVATION

Students recognized the necessity of staying motivated. Shelly described both inner drive and outside supporters as essential when she said, “I think you have to have like a, a cheerleader... somebody that says this is important, . . . you know anything to motivate you. But I also think that there are certain people that have the motivation within them without the cheerleader.” She went on to cite the importance of passion, “If you have something that allows you to be passionate about whatever it is that you’re doing, I think that continues the motivation. It’s the reason to continue. Like how do we make it better? How do we change it?” Lynn described being motivated by a peer’s actions. She saw her classmate proactively reaching out to professors and realized she needed to follow this example. Pam stated:

I have the same work ethic; I just have to manage more work now. I have the same drive; I just have to dig a little deeper and I need a little more drive to get these additional responsibilities that I’ve taken on to get them completed. I think what’s different is it expands your mind. You’re learning things you didn’t know before.

Participants attributed their academic discipline to perseverance, drive and work ethic.

STRESS

Some of the same traits helped students handle stress. Stress is clearly part of being a doctoral student, and the participants were aware of its presence in their lives. They found various ways to handle stress. Pam stated, “I would say on the stress Richter scale I’m way over where anyone should be. But I’m a good time manager so I’ll just have to work it out. I’ll have to get it done.” Susan said:

I feel like having a kid makes you have to play and rest more than if I were all by myself. So I don’t get to do . . . I can’t do work all the time. I have to like run around at the park and read books. And so I have that built into my schedule, which is great.

Employing socio-emotional skills led to successful stress management.

GOAL-SETTING

Goal-setting was discussed in terms of the doctoral community and the similarities and differences between students. Pam revealed that “By and large it’s been very good. Everyone wants the same thing. They want to learn everything they can learn and they want to finish the dissertation. We all have the common goals,” and Linda explained, “I really believe that everybody should be able to kind of do what they want to do with their lives. Reach their goals. Self-actualize. But that’s going to look so different for each of us.” Participants used their socio-emotional skills to meet their own goals.

TIME MANAGEMENT

Melissa recognized the importance of time management as she said, “I mean you plan and I’m, I’m very good at time management. That’s my strength,” and Linda acknowledged the need to handle stress as she stated, “I work well under pressure. So that’s one trait that I have had to rely on.” Several participants talked about the tasks they no longer fit into their schedules because they had to prioritize schoolwork: “Fitness and exercise and all of that stuff you know I feel like that’s totally gone out the window” (Linda); “I would say there’s close to no relaxation. Like I’ve had to give up yoga all together” (Pam); “Housework has had to kind of be let go and not be a priority.... I don’t spend as much time doing you know cleaning the house or working outside” (Linda); “House cleaning kind of went to the, went to the side. Grocery shopping was intermittent like all of the other duties and responsibilities you had they kind of go by the wayside” (Debbie). Participants talked about the difficulties of maintaining a positive family life. Pam explained:

So yeah that’s been, that’s been challenging because you don’t want to take away from your relationship with [grandchildren] because we have so much fun together and we’re very close.... it’s very hard to say no to a two-year-old who just wants to hang out with you.... So I would say that the biggest change is that I have to be stronger in saying I’m going to the library now.

Other respondents added, “Yeah and my mom is really interested, but I often also don’t have much time to talk” (Susan); “My laundry is to the ceiling. And [my husband and sons] barely get fed. They’re learning to be chefs themselves and make for me because they still are at home. So they’ve stepped up to the plate for sure” (Melissa). Family relationships are significant for maintaining a caring environment.

DECISION-MAKING

These doctoral students were very conscious of the decisions they made, particularly those that led to their doctoral study, and the reasons behind these decisions, illustrating the connections between self-awareness and decision-making. In order to pursue doctoral study, participants made a series of decisions over many years that prepared them to begin their studies. They made educational decisions about what to study as both undergraduate and masters’ students. Lynn and Susan were both influenced by study abroad experiences. Other participants made career decisions as well. Debbie, Linda, and Shelly’s career change decisions led to study in a new field they wished to pursue, while Susan and Melissa’s doctorate will provide additional opportunities in their current jobs. Participants took diverse paths, yet they all arrived at doctoral study after a series of crucial decisions. Their conscious decision-making reveals their self-awareness; doctoral study did not occur by happenstance.

CARING RELATIONSHIPS

In their discussion of the relationships that supported them throughout their study, they clearly identified emotions triggered by these relationships, and they discussed how those who cared for them helped them to recognize their own strengths and gain more self-confidence, providing evidence of the link between self-awareness and solidarity/relationships. Linda described an undergraduate professor who took an interest in her and encouraged her, and she described the importance of family in maintaining her equilibrium, “A typical day really involves just being with my son. You know doing, playing with him, going places with him. And just kind of being with my husband and my son.” Melissa described her husband as her “biggest cheerleader . . . I think that is so key for anyone, for students, for anyone is to have that person that is always going to, is always going to be there,” and her mother who “encourages me to be the best that I can be. And I’ll say this . . . it’s that my mom taught me somehow that if you work hard enough your dreams will come true.” Pam described growing up “in a very service oriented family” where she “could just hear my mother going,

you got, you got to work with her. You're the one . . . do it. Just do it. You've got to help this girl through this, you know," inspiring her to follow a career in special education.

Participants also expressed self-awareness when they acknowledged feeling respected and recognized by peers and professors in their programs; as they saw themselves represented in others, they concluded that they belonged in a doctoral program and became more aware of themselves as capable doctoral students. Recognized achievement on assignments was particularly affirming for these doctoral students. Pam talked about her early success:

So I think it was very, very enjoyable and it was easy for me to do those [initial] readings and make those connections to my own practice. And it was very self-affirming. So I felt like early on the first course you take is servant leadership. And I felt like I just kicked butt in that class because everything we read I could find a connection to my own practice. And so I got a lot of positive feedback from classmates and a lot of positive feedback from the crabby professor who happens to love this topic as well.

Susan also commented on the importance of having her success recognized. She said:

I just submitted a book review to the applied linguistics class. That was one of the things . . . assignments and [the professor] said to consider submitting it for publication. . . . And she wrote back and said [I] don't need to change anything. This is amazing. And I was expecting like you know pages of [corrections]. And I thought well I didn't expect that.

Respect and recognition were important elements of caring relationships for the participants.

Participants appreciated the confirmation they received from family members, peers, and professors that they belonged in a doctoral program and had the academic skills to be successful. Susan talked about the importance of sharing ideas and academic experiences with her husband:

My husband. I feel like there's no way I could do it if he were sort of lukewarm about it or not . . . he is extremely committed to making sure that I can do what I need to do. My husband is interested in adult learning because he works at the co-working space downtown and so they do a lot of actual adult education. And so he's . . . like he read some of the books from my, my class last semester and he's always interested.

Melissa described the confirmation she received from her peers:

So one of the first projects that we had due . . . I want the authentic feedback. So they gave that, but what they also gave was that the writing was clear and that it told a story and that it was engaging, which made me feel like wow okay. Then maybe I do belong here.

Pam related how she felt when her professor gave her positive feedback on an assignment:

And then [the professor] said [Pam], this is excellent. [Pam], this is perfect. And, and he's really hard to please and he's so . . . He just . . . he sets a high bar and he's very . . . He's picky, and that's okay. But he kept saying you know oh this was excellent. This was so great. You did a great job. And he doesn't typically say those things. So I thought like wow you know. . . . And I thought oh my God this . . . I did this. And I get it.

These instances of confirmation motivated the participants and led to additional successful experiences.

Mentors were important in providing that confirmation as the participants made the decision to pursue doctoral study, and peer relationships were particularly influential once the students began their programs as they experienced respectful and reciprocal interactions with cohort members. Debbie recalled, "I don't necessarily think that I thought that . . . I would be in this program, but my mentor . . . once I finished that master's program, she was like . . . I really think that you should consider getting a doctorate," and Melissa related the importance of peers when she said, "I will say our cohort is

so supportive of each other. We text each other. We're on a group chat. We email each other. We share ideas. We pick each other up."

Reciprocity was also present in family relationships that provided students with support in completing life tasks at home and managing time and commitments. Linda said:

My husband is a wonderful, wonderful person. We have a very kind of give and take equality in our relationship. So he's picked up a ton of stuff as far as maintenance of the house and helping to balance everything. So he's really freed up a lot of you know time for me, particularly on the weekends if I need to get a paper done or something.

The support of her husband facilitated Linda's learning and contributed to her success.

The significant addition in this overlap was the presence of caring for as participants' reasons for engaging in doctoral study were often rooted in their care for others in their family and their caring about marginalized populations in society. Shelly, a single mother with a daughter who has a learning disability, talked about initially pursuing graduate study in order to improve her employment opportunities: "I knew that if I didn't educate myself further that my earning potential would be limited ... to support her became my focus.... then it turned into more about showing [my daughter] that it was possible. That's why I continue." Lynn investigated workforce education, but she found that in this area, "Nobody was interested in immigrants or nobody was interested in talking about the marginalized," yet an earlier study abroad program had "[given her] motivation and grew [her] interest toward [working with] the marginalized [people]" so she pursued her doctorate in adult education.

The study results clearly indicate that care in doctoral study facilitates learning and contributes to student success and feelings of well-being. Students used and further developed socio-emotional skills, particularly in building supportive and caring relationships. They maintained motivation, managed their time and stress, pursued their goals, and continued to make thoughtful decisions throughout their first year. The caring relationships they developed with family, friends, and faculty members reflected their self-awareness, illustrated reciprocal respect, provided recognition, and acknowledged achievement, confirming their suitability as doctoral students and contributing to their initial success. As our participants articulated, care and socio-emotional learning were key factors in their successful first year of doctoral study.

CONCLUSION

According to Elias (2003), the first tenet of socio-emotional learning is that "learning requires care" (p. 8). The participants in this study clearly used socio-emotional skills to build caring relationships that supported their learning. Their self-awareness was a key factor in their establishment of these significant relationships. Their self-management was important as they handled the stress of balancing family, work, and academic demands. Feeley (2014) argued that "learning care is less about sentiment and more about skilled, respectful learning facilitation" (p. 168); this was particularly evident in the relationships students developed with mentors, professors, and peers. These caring relationships provided validation that the students belonged in doctoral programs and would be successful in doctoral study, reinforcing the many decisions they made over time that led to their doctoral study.

As "the complex role of care is often unrecognized, undervalued and overshadowed" (Feeley, 2014, p. 157), particularly in the most advanced levels of education, it is important for doctoral programs to examine what can be done to enhance relationship-building in order to increase the success of students. This study supports the idea that "[e]ffective, lasting academic and social-emotional learning is built upon caring relationships and warm but challenging classroom and school environments" (Elias, 2006, p. 7) and calls for more attention to care in doctoral study.

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BIOGRAPHIES



Carol Rogers-Shaw is a Ph. D. candidate in Lifelong Learning and Adult Education at the Pennsylvania State University. She earned a B.A. and an M.A. in English, as well as an M.S. in Education with a concentration in Reading from Fordham University. Certified as both a secondary school teacher and supervisor, she taught high school English for over 30 years. Having taught extensively in a program that transitioned learning disabled adolescents, English language learners, and socio-economically disadvantaged students with weak basic skills into mainstream classes, she developed a strong interest in providing educational opportunities for marginalized students. Her research interests include increasing access to higher education and lifelong learning, distance education, stigma and disability disclosure, Universal Design for Learning, identity development of learners

with disabilities, and doctoral and graduate study.



Dr. Davin Carr-Chellman is an assistant professor of education in the Adult, Organizational Learning and Leadership Program in the College of Education, Health and Human Sciences at the University of Idaho. He joined the faculty at the University of Idaho in 2016 and has an ongoing research agenda focused on individual, organizational, and community capacity building, especially within the framework of adult learning and agency. The specific contexts for his investigations include religious organizations, public schools, online education, and doctoral and graduate education. Davin received his Ph.D. from Penn State in Adult Education with a focus on ethical development in community based contexts. His B.A. and M.A. are in philosophy and are also from Penn State.

Dr. Carr-Chellman has 20 years of university level teaching experience and has been recognized as a dedicated educator, earning several teaching awards.