Moving toward Professional Self-Authorship: A Study of Graduate Students in a Preparing Future Faculty Program

The purpose of this research is to explore the impact of a Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) program at a state-sponsored research university on participants’ perspectives and practices through the following research questions:

I. How do students narrate their experiences in the PFF?

II. How do students describe the role of the PFF in their movement toward professional self-authorship?

We intend to explore how participants came to trust the internal voice, build the internal foundation, and secure the internal commitments that allow them to choose and persist through the divergent path to an academic career in the context of an environment that strongly encourages other pursuits (Baxter-Magolda, 2008).

Theoretical Perspectives

This study examines the impact of a PFF program on participants’ beliefs, perceptions, and practices. The motivation for this study is based on the need to understand the impacts of this program on participants’ pathways through graduate school, their experiences teaching, and their preparation for postdoctoral positions. Baxter-Magolda (2008) describes a students’ development as a shift from constructing meaning based on external authorities (e.g., an instructor) to constructing meaning based one’s internal authority. During the graduate school experience, the students craft an internal identity within their discipline, as they critically analyze external perspectives to make knowledge claims about their research. As participants of the PFF program, the graduate students self-select to engage in a learning environment that introduces them to new ways of thinking about education and new avenues for their future career pathway. Thus, from a
developmental perspective they are asked to reflect on their epistemological foundation in this context and consider how the course content and course activities (e.g., teaching a course as a first-time instructor-of-record) affect their own values and identity. In addition, the assignments in the courses require students to, as Baxter Magolda (2004) describes it, “genuinely take others’ perspectives into account without being consumed by them” as they examine alternative career pathways (p. 8). Thus, Baxter-Magolda’s Theory of Self-Authorship will provide a structure to consider students’ experiences within the PFF program, how they have been affected by those experiences, and the extent to which making sense of those experiences affects (or affected) their perceptions, intentions, and actions.

Methods

A case study methodology (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009) will be used to further our understanding of graduate students’ experiences within this PFF and the program’s impact on their career pathways. The data collection and analysis are primarily qualitative in nature, though attention will be given to salient differences in demographic comparisons of impact. Data collection will occur between July 2014 and December 2014. Multiple sources of data will be collected concurrently: an online survey, course work, semi-structured interviews, and an online discussion forum among all participants. The population consists of 66 PFF alumni. All 66 program alumni have been solicited for participation in the study.

The online survey, which includes an adaptation of Hall’s (1975) Levels of Use framework, will serve to capture the extent to which participants use the techniques and concepts from the program within their current position. Within the PFF courses, students drafted final reflection reports and teaching philosophy statements. A review of this coursework will further our understanding of how students narrate changes in their perceptions, attitudes, and/or
intentions within and across PFF courses. Semi-structured interviews will facilitate an understanding of how the PFF participants interpret their experiences within the program and how those experiences impacted their career trajectory. Finally, an online discussion forum will provide a setting for an asynchronous focus group to capture participants’ narratives of their experiences within and after PFF.

**Scholarly Significance**

Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) programs expose graduate students to educational theory and provide opportunities for mentored practice. In addition, these programs serve to prepare graduate students for the professional challenges inherent in a variety of postdoctoral career pathways. By examining a particular PFF and understanding how students narrate their experiences during and following the program, we can begin to explore how a PFF program can support graduate student development in conjunction with discipline-specific graduate studies. Results will aid in the continual improvement of PFF programs and complement existing research by examining the role of self-authorship in future faculty development.
References


