

“Like a Family”: Perspectives of Doctoral Students from Traditionally Under-represented Populations on Cohorts

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Abstract: This study examined the experiences of special education doctoral students from minority populations and investigated the perceptions of students in the cohort experience. Three themes emerged: The cohort was a (a) family for bonding and support, (b) motivator for academic success and retention, and an (c) inhibitor of educational growth.

In recent years, a number of universities and institutions for higher learning have been using different types of learning models in an attempt to improve the quality of the education being offered; one of these models of learning has been the cohort educational model (CEM). The CEM stems from Vygotsky’s theory of the *zone of proximal development*, which consists of two levels: solving problems independently and accomplishing goals by seeking the assistance of a more knowledgeable peer (as cited in John-Steiner & Mahn, 2003). Vygotsky maintains that having the same group of peers interact and share their learned experiences will further one’s own knowledge and understanding. A CEM is a group of students bound together by a program of study who take the majority of their coursework together (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000; Miller & Irby, 1999; Potthoff, Fredrickson, Batenhorst, & Tracy, 2001).

Huey states (as cited in Potthoff et al., 2001) that there are eight dimensions to cohorts: (a) social interaction, (b) common mission, (c) group and individual learning, (d) cohesiveness, (e) collaboration, (f) academic success, (g) interaction with professors, and (h) retention. Social interaction is created by the bonds formed in the CEM and it extends from simply meeting for class to learning about each other and interacting outside of the courses. The CEM offers all students in the model a common mission: to finish a pre-determined program of study in a period of time. The model allows for the individuals to grow independently and as a group through their shared experiences (John-Steiner & Mahn, 2003). Through the interactions and collaboration as a group, a cohesiveness or bond is formed within the group (Potthoff et al., 2001). Academic success and retention are improved by the motivation created by the group; members drive each other to complete the program.

Within my doctoral program of Special Education¹ there existed a CEM which consisted entirely of students from minority populations who were enrolled in the same courses I was. One of the members asked me if I would be interested in conducting a study with her on the CEM; she wanted to study the perspectives of non-cohort students. Upon some preliminary research on the CEM, I was unable to locate any study that focused on the perspectives of students in a cohort whose members were all minority students. This piqued my curiosity. Having been able to study them as an observer in classes, I would further investigate how they felt about the cohort, and the whole program. It would also give me insight on why they chose this educational model over the more traditional models. From this study I hoped to answer two major questions: (a)

¹ The special education faculty had received a federal grant to implement a leadership preparation program for students from under-represented populations.

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http://coeweb.fiu.edu/research_conference/

What are the doctoral experiences of minority students in a CEM, and (b) What motivators help doctoral students continue in the programs?

The Researcher and the Participants

As the researcher, I studied the participants with whom I have been taking courses for the past two years. Although I am not part of the cohort, I have become familiar with them through their presentations and group assignments. Not having all of my classes with them gave me enough distance to see them with the eyes of an outside observer, yet still have good enough rapport to ask questions about their CEM experiences. Since they already knew me, my study habits and my dispositions, getting them to trust me as an interviewer was a non-issue. The hardest part was not including identifiable information. The CEM is relatively small; therefore, personal information could reveal participants' identity.

For this reason I chose responsive interviewing. This type of interviewing allowed the interviewee to feel comfortable speaking to me, knowing that I would keep his or her confidentiality and anonymity. Responsive interviewing creates a dialogue where both parties are comfortable and each one's style is allowed to be expressed (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). I used journaling to reflect upon each interview and to analyze questions to determine whether further investigation was needed. I adjusted my questions as I saw connections.

There were 16 students in this doctoral CEM, with a mean age of 36 and each of the students was non-traditional, meaning that each represented a minority group (44% were Hispanic, 38% were African American, and 19% were Caucasian; all were from a religious minority; three were males and 13 were females) while holding full-time jobs and being enrolled in a full-time university doctoral program. This CEM was located in a large state university within a large Hispanic community. The CEM itself was created to represent the existing university which consisted at the time of the study of 52% Hispanic, 14% Black, 21% Caucasian, and 3% Asian, Indian, and other ethnicities (Fact Book, 2001). As John pointed out, the CEM "is a miniature, cultural melting pot." This was the second year of the CEM and most students have a handful of courses left prior to their dissertations. All courses were taken as a group, except those who entered the CEM later. For most of their courses, the CEM members were the only students in each course.

All members of the CEM were employed in varying capacities, from teaching to having a position in education in one of three large neighboring school districts. The three participants chosen for this study also varied in their respective positions in the school system. Pseudonyms have been given to each to protect their identities.

Mily was a Hispanic female in her late twenties. She had earned a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education and a Master's degree in Educational Leadership. At the time of the study, she was an administrator in a local public elementary school. Her educational background was not special education, but she decided to pursue this degree to learn how to better help the students she was serving.

John was a male of a religious minority in his mid forties, married with two very young children. He taught within the juvenile prison system, instructing young incarcerated adults. Education is his second career, and he also had no background in special education. His Bachelor's degree was in Management and Computer Science and his Master's degree was in education. He chose to enter this program because most of the students he taught were students with learning disabilities.

Katherine was an African American mother in her early thirties. Her educational background was very much ingrained in special education, having received a Bachelor's degree

in Mental Retardation and Varying Exceptionalities, a Master's degree in Reading and Learning Disabilities, and a Specialist degree in Early Childhood Education. She was a reading specialist in an urban school, serving as a mentor and coach, empowering teachers with instructional strategies for literacy.

Method

An interview protocol (see Appendix A; Rubin & Rubin, 2005) was developed by testing a series of questions with another colleague from the same CEM and who is studying cohorts from a different perspective. The questions were then revised to tie some loose ends. Participants were chosen by asking for participation, one by one, in no particular order. When one declined to participate, another CEM student was asked. Each participant was interviewed for approximately one hour on audiotape. The interviews were immediately transcribed. Then they were e-mailed to the participant for accuracy of transcriptions (Merriam, 2002), and to the colleague studying cohorts for peer review (Merriam, 2002). A reflective journal was used to clarify questions and find missing information.

Grounded theory was used to gather data and find the emerging themes. In grounded theory, "the concepts and themes must emerge from the data without the use of the literature" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 221-222). Open coding, or "coding as you go along," (p. 222) helped in developing the main themes (see Appendix B); I probed the next participant in topics that arose from the previous interview. Some themes that emerged were similar to ones from existing literature but new themes also emerged.

A general search for "cohorts" was conducted using WilsonWeb and APA psychNET. This resulted in too many items, so the search was narrowed to "doctoral students in cohorts." I also searched ERIC using "cohorts" and "doctoral students." The term "cohort" was being used to describe any group, including larger groups of students. Having the literature and the themes from the coding, I proceeded to search for similarities and differences between the two sources.

Findings

The definition of a CEM that emerged from this study differed from the one used by Huey (as cited in Potthoff et al., 2001). Instead of eight dimensions of a CEM, three emerged. The CEM as seen by these minority students is one is a (a) family for bonding and support, (b) motivator for academic success and retention, and (c) inhibitor of educational growth.

CEM as Family for Bonding and Support

According to all three participants, the first three dimensions to Huey's definition were one and the same under their view of "family." The group of individuals was "coming together for a common goal" (Mily). This common goal or "bond," as John called it, brought a new element into the definition.

The CEM became more than just a group; it was a group with a mission, which created a unity and a tighter bond than just students taking courses together in a particular order. The term "family" was a sub-theme in the literature for describing this tighter bond (Potthoff et al., 2001; Wesson, Holman, Holman, & Cox, 1996). However, all three participants in this study continually referred to each other as family members, raising this to a major theme in this study. "Within a CEM you have almost like a family type experience," stated Mily. Mily referred again to the CEM as a family, stating, "I think you get a feel of closeness, like almost as if you have your own family within the cohort." Katherine felt that CEMs allow a "family bond that you can create knowing that you have someone there with you." This knowledge of not being in it alone was also shared by John. He compared the members of the CEM to sailors on a ship that had already embarked on the journey and they had to keep the ship afloat or all would sink. In

comparing the CEM to other models, Katherine felt “it’s a little more close knit so it [is] still more of a family as opposed to you are just the recipient of this scholarship and you are in this group and you will take classes together.”

Like in all new families, this CEM went through an adjustment period when they were still getting to know each other and did not want to offend or enrage anyone. As Mily explained, “In the beginning like everybody is tip-toeing around each other and you know, somebody still doesn’t want to say something because you don’t want to offend somebody else. But I think that once you have gotten to that point where maybe you have [to] duke it out with somebody in the sense that you have had words, you understand where they are coming from. Or once you understand who people are, you actually had that chance to build that bond with them.”

Apart from this adjustment period, members felt that their group is not as cohesive as they would like to see it. John pointed out that “forced integration [isn’t] necessarily . . . happening.” As Katherine stated,

To a certain degree I think smaller cliques have been created in the cohort. . . . you tend to get along better with some people based on whether it’s where you live or who you work well with or, you know, just who you get along with in conversation. And, but I think for the most part everyone supports one another to a certain degree, because we can be critical of one another but not get upset. We know we are all working towards the same goal. So in the end everyone is pretty much supportive.

The other two participants supported this view. Mily phrased it best by saying, “But even for those, I guess that I’m not as close to, you can still count on them. You’re having a bad day; they will still encourage you on.” Despite the adjustment periods and the cohort-within-a-cohort, the “family” pushed through and all helped each other. “We all gotta be supporting each other to make it to the finish line,” stated John. This concept was supported by Miller and Irby (1999) who report that the CEM provides empathy, support, and solidarity for the ultimate goal.

CEM as Motivator for Academic Success and Retention

Academic success and student retention were tied to motivation for these participants. All three participants have multiple degrees and attribute their success so far to intrinsic motivation. John sees it as “the improvement of the self and well, the intellectual conquest.” However, with all of them holding full-time jobs and supporting themselves and a family, motivation to complete this degree was not found without outside help. “Before it was just me and I had the time to do it and I had the energy. But now with work and the kids and the family, the doc program, it is proving to be challenging,” stated Katherine. Being in the CEM gave them the extra push when they are feeling overwhelmed. Not wanting to let the group down or be last in the group helped Katherine finish tasks. This type of positive competition helped maintain academic success. The family atmosphere that was created also stops many from just quitting. Knowing that they were all going through the same process together allows them to be a support group for each other. Using John’s metaphor, the ship needed to reach ashore for the members to disembark.

CEM as Inhibitor of Educational Growth

Participants in the CEM obtained their education easily, but this limited their growth. Many minute yet important items were handled by professors or assistants, so participants had fewer worries and can concentrate more on the program. Their program of study was pre-designed, and their materials were already prepared. They had the same professors and were all in the same classes. Classes and meetings were held at convenient times. Professors were

notified of the fact that they will be teaching the CEM. However, these conveniences also took away some possibilities for expansion and growth. For Mily, being with the same group for all her classes limited her interactions and stunted the growth of knowledge that she would have acquired from having outside sources. She states, “You don’t get to meet other people as much,” limiting her experiences to those in the CEM. Since all of their coursework was pre-planned, they did not explore different paths in the minor cognate. This limited their individual learning and experiences to that which was pre-set by the program.

Discussion

This study reaffirms some of the findings of previous research on the function of CEMs but narrows the components previously mentioned to three. This study raises the sub-theme of family found in prior literature to an actual theme. Family and family atmosphere is important to doctoral students. The CEM expands their existing families and creates a tighter bond that then helps them to move forward in their studies and careers. This study supports research that a cohort-within-a-cohort creates small tensions, but in the big picture does not change the feeling of family. The participants enjoy fewer tensions than most doctoral students, including a group of students who would be in the same classes. This reliable group helps in motivating the doctoral students to continue their studies. Motivation to complete the program of study is no longer left to simply intrinsic forces but rather to the collective forces of all members of the CEM. The CEM is a strong factor in ensuring that all of its “family” members complete the program together. On the other hand, being with the same group throughout all of their coursework has its limiting problems. Students felt hindered in their experiences and resources as well as in their choices for classes and further study.

One implication of this study is that there should be more involvement from professors. It is not enough to have their questions answered in class; they need more involvement in upcoming events, such as the dissertation. Students are to begin their dissertations, but they need more guidance in the middle and final steps of their program. Barnett et al. (2000) speaks about the positive impact that professors of the CEM have on its members as it relates to faculty advisement, teaching assignments and faculty-student relationships. Mixed feelings about their professors’ active role in their academic learning emerged from this study’s participants. Katherine feels that the professors are supportive in helping in coursework and being flexible; however, as she feels she’s had lack of training in her upcoming dissertation: “I am hoping with our last few courses they nip that in the bud.” Mily states, “Yes we are adults and yes we have successful jobs and we have our family, but it doesn’t feel like they are as involved and really care if we pass or not unless it starts to reflect on them.”

Conclusions and Implications for Further Study

There are distinct advantages afforded to members of CEMs. The unity, or family type atmosphere, creates a positive learning environment where all are working towards achieving the same goal. Competition is limited to small positive effects and working as a group to find solutions are rewarded. The facilitation of studies, by relieving small but tension-causing items, helps the students focus on their study. Although all students seeking a doctoral degree bring in their own intrinsic motivation, the CEM continues to fuel this motivation and replenish it when the energy is low.

As evidenced by this study, there is a need for more investigation on the role of the professors in the CEM. This model of instruction calls for a different type of teaching from the professor, one that has not yet been clearly defined. The needs of the CEM are different from the

individual needs of doctoral students. Understanding this need could help increase retention of doctoral students and improve graduate studies programs.

Further studies should be conducted on the cohort-within-a-cohort found in this study. Further investigation should focus on whether CEMs made up of minorities tend to work within their own minority group. This investigation would help in the creation of programs to better integrate mixed CEMs and maximize their potential.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Questions for Students in a Cohort

- Would you please tell me a little bit about yourself, your educational background, and professional experience?
- Would you define what a cohort means to you?
- Please tell me a bit about how you heard about the cohort you are part of and how you first became interested in it.
- Please describe your current educational experiences in a cohort.
- Please share what you feel the positive experiences are for you in the cohort.
- Please describe any negative experiences or limitations you have encountered as part of a cohort.
- What do you think makes students want to join a cohort?
- Describe how you think the cohort has supported you to continue your studies.
- What other factors motivate you to continue your program of study?

- Is the cohort program paying for your studies?
- How have your courses trained you for the dissertation process (formal IRB process, not just course projects)?
- How has the cohort program prepared you to meet your professional goals?
- Is there anything else you would like to share that I did not ask?