Meaning of Social Interactions Among Phase 2 Part-Time Doctoral Students

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Introduction

According to Fall 2015 enrollment data reported by National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 1.7 million post-baccalaureate students were full-time, while part-time students comprised 1.3 million. This indicates that the landscape of post-secondary education is increasingly diverse with part-time adult learners pursuing post-baccalaureate degrees making up a proportion close to full-time students. Literature on doctoral education is ubiquitous, with a rising interest in the doctoral students’ educational experience. Several factors have been found to influence the educational experience of doctoral students, including some related to their non-traditional adult learner characteristic.

Non-traditional students are characterized as those who have families, attend school part-time, are financially independent, have full-time jobs (Choy, 2002), are 25 years or older, return to school after years of employment (Lake & Pushchak, 2007). These students often live at a distance, are faced with the prioritization of full-time work, full-time parenting, all the while dealing with challenges related to their geographical distance, and personal life challenges. As a result of these factors, part-time students may not be able to take advantage of formal and non-formal opportunities to interact that their full-time counterparts may benefit from. Thus, this reality may place the part-time student at a disadvantage in attaining the developmental expectations of the stage two phase, as well as may present a risk of student attrition. According to Kelley and Salisbury-Glennon (2016), it is estimated that 60% of doctoral students fail to complete their dissertation, with financial, social, and involvement factors contributing to the onset of this phenomenon. Thus, it is important to gain a thorough understanding of the role that these factors play in the doctoral educational experience.

Doctoral Socialization Experience

The doctoral learning experience is said to be one of socialization in which students gain and demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and abilities to be accepted as a member of a society of research professionals through attaining the doctoral degree (Gardner, 2008). Due to this, formal and informal interactions with peers, mentors, family, faculty, and others play a significant role in the acquisition of knowledge, skills and abilities and are a source of support, contributing to the students’ development as future professional researchers (Baker & Pifer, 2010; Boden, Borrego, & Newswander, 2011; Gardner, 2010a). Examined as a developmental process, Grover (2007) describes doctoral education as consisting of four stages: exploration, engagement, consolidation, and exit. Each stage corresponds to key defining moments that describe the developmental experience. In stage two (engagement), students interact with faculty and colleagues while engaging in research and publications, navigate research interests, identify potential committee members, and create synergy between course projects, research activities, and their own academic goals. Although each stage requires some level of social interactions, it can be argued that in this second stage of Grover’s categorization the role of social interactions begins to show great significance for progression into later stages.
Current literature on doctoral education suggest a link to positive learning experiences when students engage in formal social interactions (i.e. cohort, Co-ops, research group) or non-formal/informal social interactions (i.e. with other peers, faculty, advisors, professionals, family members, and friends) (Hopwood & Paulson, 2012; Riese, Samara, & Lillejord, 2012). Furthermore, studies focused on understanding the doctoral student socialization experience have identified common feelings of loneliness, ambiguity, and self-doubt about their scholarly abilities (Bircher, 2012; Castillo, 2011; Frasier, 2013; Gardner, 2010a). Other studies have examined the experiences of doctoral students in general, and doing so through comparisons by disciplines (Gardner, 2010a; Gopaul, 2011), by institutional characteristics or policies (Barnes & Randall, 2012; Frasier, 2013; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2012), from faculty perspective (Gardner, 2010b), by program stages (Baker & Pifer, 2010; Gardner, 2008; Grover, 2007).

Using semi-structured interviews, Baker and Pifer (2010) investigated the role that relationships played on business students’ identity development as a doctoral student and research scholar and found a positive relationship. Furthermore, through phenomenological inquiry, Bircher (2012) described the positive influence of peer mentorship on feelings of collegiality among part-time doctoral students among a sample of students from interdisciplinary field and who were in various stages of the doctoral program. Few studies have explored the unique socialization experience of part-time social science doctoral students in stage 2 of their program through a phenomenological lens.

**The Part-Time Student**

As scholars in training, developing a sense of belonging in a community are significant elements of their socialization. Thus, opportunities for informal and formal social interactions are important for supporting a positive educational experience, especially for part-time doctoral students who may feel disengaged as a result of their part-time status. In their analysis of pedagogical practices and institutional policies in doctoral education, McAlpine & Amundsen (2012) found that although a common assumption is that advisor supervision is the primary source of support for doctoral students; however, their research findings from analysis of student progress logs revealed that the support received by doctoral students was dispersed across a variety of social sources. These included peers, other faculty, student groups, family, friends, and supervisors, with a proportionate attribution to resources, ranging from 15% - 20% each, indicating that there are various social interactions and relationships that are developed and maintained by doctoral students that serve as resources.

Furthermore, the variety in support resources was a reflection of the different roles that each group played in the type of support received by students (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2012). Doctoral students shared experiences which included contact with direct supervisors, interactions with field experts and professionals, participation in peer and faculty research/laboratory groups, and engagement with peers. This provides an indication of the positive influence of both unstructured/informal and structured/formal opportunities for social interactions on doctoral student progress, however, the reality is that not all programs offer these same opportunities. Golde and Dore (2001) describe the different types of doctoral programs as consisting of those in which students conduct research and gain knowledge and abilities under the direct supervision of faculty advisors, meeting frequently, work in laboratories and in groups with other students, such as in the natural sciences; whereas in programs such as the social sciences, students work independently, meet with their advisors irregularly, and have their own research interests. These distinct
differences in the structure of doctoral programs by discipline presents a plausible reason to further examine the doctoral experience in the context of a discipline, such as the social sciences that traditionally tend to lack the non-formal and informal structures that support social interactions.

The current study attempts to explore the part-time social science doctoral student’s educational experience to gain an in-depth understanding of the essence of the influence and role of social interactions in their socialization. Therefore, according to Creswell (2007) a phenomenological qualitative approach is most appropriate given this nature of the research inquiry. Furthermore, this will be accomplished by collecting the viewpoint of individuals with diverse backgrounds who share common experiences as part-time doctoral students. Through this qualitative approach, the goal is to allow individuals to reflect and frame their own meaning about the experience, using Seidman’s (2013) three interview series approach to guide data collection. The findings are understood and interpreted using a conceptual framework that encompasses the socialization that takes place as individuals develop the norms, values, and beliefs of becoming a research scholar, and the social and educational experience of students at stage two of the doctoral program as defined by Grover (2007). Additionally, Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural learning theory provides a theoretical framework for understanding the socialization experience that occurs in the context of social and cultural interactions. This theory posits that learning occurs as individuals’ place meaning to their social interactions with people and connect with their environment (culture).

Baker and Pifer (2010) point to a need for further research on the learning experience of doctoral students as it is influenced by factors that are both internal and external to the formal educational setting. The valuable insight gained from the interviews of participants who describe their unique social interaction experiences as phase 2 part-time doctoral students, can be helpful to doctoral program administrators in establishing programs and practices that enhance the educational experience of this unique group of adult learners. The research question that drove the current study is: What is the meaning of social interactions in the lived experiences of phase 2 part-time doctoral students in social science disciplines? Following, is a description of the sample, an overview of the qualitative process used for data collection, a presentation of the findings and its analysis, and a discussion that includes implications for future research.

Method

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit study participants. The sample used for the study consisted of three part-time status (taking a maximum of six credit hours) doctoral students pursuing a degree in the social sciences at a four-year higher education research institution located in the southeastern region of the United States. Each participant was enrolled in a fall semester dissertation course that students are required to take at the end of program coursework that prepares them for their dissertation proposal. According to Grover’s (2007) doctoral education developmental stage classification, participants were in stage two of their doctoral program such that they were either preparing to take comprehensive exams or had recently taken them, were deciding on a research topic, and were in the process of selecting committee members. All participants were employed full-time. The research participants were in different social science doctoral program disciplines, and the sample group consisted of one Black female, one White female, and one White male. In addition, two participants were in programs that were traditionally face-to-face and incorporated hybrid courses, while another was in a program that was mainly
online but incorporated face-to-face courses in the later stage of the program. Finally, participants differed in background characteristics with two who were married/serious relationship and had children, and one who was single and did not have any children. This diversity in characteristics provides a realistic representation of the varying make-up of part-time doctoral students from which the essence of the part-time doctoral experience can be captured and understood.

**Procedure**

Upon obtaining approval from the institutional review board, an email announcement was sent to the instructor of the dissertation research course offered at the institution for distribution to the students taking the class in the current Fall semester. In the email, students were informed about the purpose of the study, the confidentiality, their right to withdraw from the study at any time and provided with the principal investigator’s contact information for use if they had questions about the study. Attached to the email, was a long consent form that provided further details about the study and the data collection procedures. In addition, a snowball sampling technique was used by encouraging interview participants and current doctoral students to inform other students who were enrolled in the course about the opportunity to participate in the study. As students self-selected to participate in the study, they were required to complete a consent form, acknowledging their consent to participate. As a result of the sampling methods, three qualified students agreed to participate in the study that used an interview approach for data collection.

Interview meetings were set-up with participants through email correspondence. Participants were given the liberty to select a meeting time that was most convenient for them and were given the option of conducting the interview in person or through online videoconferencing using Zoom. All participants selected the videoconferencing method, and interviews were conducted in the evening (after participants were finished with school and work), as well as on the weekend. Prior to starting each interview, an email notification/reminder was sent from Zoom to the participants reminding them of the upcoming interview and providing them with a link to join the meeting. Participants were notified that the interview would be both video and audio recorded, and that the transcription of the interview would be provided to them for their review and approval following the interview. ExpressScribe was used for transcribing the data collected. Each interview lasted on average 45 minutes, and semi-structured interview questions were designed to follow Seidman’s three interview series technique, although condensed into one interview (Seidman, 2013). According to Seidman (2013), each of the three series are successive, each having a main focus in which the information gathered in the previous is carried over into the next. The three areas of focus guide the participant to first explore their experience, then describe their experience in the context in which it occurred, and finally, reflect on the meaning/essence of their experience.

**Analysis**

Analysis of the transcribed data was conducted using Colaizzi’s Method of Analysis (Wojnar, 2007). This analysis method consisted of 1) reading the interview transcript once to familiarize with what was said, and then repeating the reading as much as needed while 2) identifying and highlighting significant statements, 3) compiling these statements to derive meanings to them, 4) categorizing the statements and grouping them by themes (into clusters) to identify commonalities between participants, 5) describing the findings based on the theoretical and conceptual frameworks, 6) and explain the findings as it relates to the phenomenon under study.
Conceptual/Theoretical Frameworks

Grover (2007) described stage 2 of engagement as one in which students are at the end of their coursework, and as they are preparing for taking their comprehensive exams and entering the dissertation phase, they begin to grasp the essence of the doctoral education, begin to build their identity as a professional in their chosen field, and can envision the end of their journey. Grover (2007) points out that:

"They also begin to sense their path of success through the program, including the colleagues and faculty members they will need to interact with and a sense of research areas and methods they particularly enjoy. It is still a struggle for many to prioritize because opportunities increase, and students straddle the broad view and the narrower personal view of research" (p. 14). Furthermore, Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory provides an explanation of the socialization experience of doctoral students as it is influenced by both social and cultural (norms, values, and beliefs) factors, such as the interactions with others in the individuals’ environment that impact an individuals’ cognitive and psychological development.

In analyzing the data collected, these elements were supported as participants described the context of their experiences as part-time doctoral students. Following are discussions of the themes developed from participants' responses as they align with elements of Grover’s stage two and Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory; also providing a depiction of the essence of the participants' doctoral education experience.

Grover's Stage Two Characteristics

Consistent with Grover’s (2007) description of stage 2, each participant was in their final semester of coursework, and were either preparing for comprehensive exams or had just taken them.

P1: “Well, now that I’m in the end of my coursework and I took comps, this fall...”

P2: “OK, so now I'm at the point to where I am in the last course that is required before you do your dissertation. So, I'm basically at the end of the course for which, I'm at the end of the coursework...”

P3: “I am finishing my plan of study this semester; my comps are scheduled for next semester. I'm starting to formulate what I want to do for a study and sort of writing a chapter one, which might apply to that.”

Social Influences in Decision to Pursue Doctoral Education

The social impact can be seen from the beginning as participants made decisions about embarking on their doctoral degree journey. Others played a part in influencing each individual’s decision to pursue their doctoral degree – family member (i.e. husband) (P1), wanting to teach individuals of all ages (P2); wanting to help others succeed and be acknowledge by colleagues (P3). These social influences carryover as participants pursue their doctoral education and describe the social interactions with individuals that have been their academic journey.

A Variety of Sources for Social Interaction

Participants shared experiences in which a variety of individuals were sources of knowledge, support, and encouragement. Supporting the findings in literature that doctoral students seek out different sources for social support, which each serve different purposes. These included family members (i.e. husband), siblings, co-workers, friends, faculty (P1); friends (cohort), peers, family,
faculty (P2); friend, co-workers, faculty/professor (P3). Acknowledging those who have had the most significant impact in their journey, participants recounted:

P1: “My husband most. He has always been convinced that I should keep going in my academic journeys. Even when I got tired and frustrated, he reminded me that I could do it. [Faculty 1] next. [Faculty 1] never treated me like I was inferior and was always interested in my ideas for assignments. Then [faculty 2]. [Faculty 2] always had time to talk and encourage me to keep going.”

P2: “I think the most important, as a part-time doctoral student with children has been my family... you know your children are like your top priority, so just having that family support system has made it to where I could accomplish as much as I have. my classmates, my cohorts... those who have given me encouraging words, those who worked hand-in-hand with me, uhm, whether it's work, time, assistance...honestly I only have one cohort that actually is an [program] major as myself, that has been a real inspiration to me...third, I have to give it to my teachers because, my professors...uhm...I have professors who really have, you know, taught me a lot and, and they will believe in you sometimes, when you didn't believe in yourself.”

P3: “A couple faculty have been really good about that. One of the best resources has been a fellow student who just recently went through the same program I did, and he just finished, he just defended. He has been successful, so I kind of was able to see what he kind of went through the past year and a half, of all the work and effort he put into it... He's certainly a great tool for advice...”

Low Levels of Social Interaction at the Beginning

Despite the fact that participants expressed different levels of social personalities, with P1 expressing her avoidance of social settings in the beginning, and P2 noting her sociable nature, all shared the experience of not having much opportunities for interactions at the beginning. This is in evidence with their comments.

P1: “In my first semester, I took one online class and one face-to-face class. While the online class was informative and interesting, it did not lead to making friends...I rarely talked in class, and I didn’t try to talk to my classmates... So, I spent a couple of very lonely years driving back and forth by myself... I spent a couple years just, you know, go to class, go to class, go home... I don’t do well in social settings generally, because I just say whatever I think...I just avoided social interaction so that I didn’t have to [pause] deal with it,”

P2: “…the only time we knew about what was going on, on campus, was with our classes. We went to class and home. There wasn’t a lot of outside of class discussions, unless we had some type of project due. But as far as building a real rapport or friendships or even as colleagues, it really, was kind of non-existent.”

P3: “Really, outside of this semester, social interaction has really been null, just because of the nature of my program. But I guess you can go back to the last academic year, because I have had more face-to-face classes that I’ve had ever, through our program, because of the nature of the classes I'm taking now... Discussions were more of a procedural thing, than an actual thing that I looked forward to.”
When asked if having the social interactions at the beginning of their program would have made a difference, P2 commented:

“If I would have had them at the beginning, I think that it would have made school a whole lot less stressful. I think I probably might, I know I most likely would not have taken that whole entire year off, because I would've had somebody out of these people that I've met and interacted with, that would have been like ok or you know, are you coming back?”

Reflecting on the regret of an academic decision made that could have have been different if P1 had made connection with peers in the department, illustrates the value participant places on interactions with their peers.

**Negative Feelings During Low Levels of Social Interaction**

As participants discussed the levels of interactions throughout their programs, it was evident that during times of less interactions at the beginning, participants described their experience at that time in more negative ways. Interestingly, at the beginning, P1 and P2 both share insecurities about their abilities or about their belonging in the program, while providing adjectives to describe their experiences at that time, participants cited feelings of isolation, uncertainty, loneliness, or frustration.

**P1:** “So, at the beginning of the program, I was convinced that everyone was better at being a doc student than I was...In the beginning, [pause to reflect], I would say afraid, uhm, isolated, and, hopeful, yes, I would say hopeful.”

**P2:** “...in the beginning, it's like everybody is trying to play a part, and everybody is trying to make sure they make the cut to even be in the program. So, nobody is able to actually say ok, this is hard, ok, I don't understand it because in your mind you're thinking I'm the only one... I felt...Uhm...Yes. Stressed, uhm, alone, and probably, I mean it's not an adjective, but I mean, I felt like, I felt uncertain, yeah, of my ability to complete it [laughs].

**P3:** “In the beginning, I guess it would be frustrated, primarily because it took me a while to understand how people talked at the institution that I'm out now, versus where I came from...”

Whereas, at the end, participants expressed common feelings of confidence and accomplishments as they saw the end in sight, with P2 citing:

“Now I feel, I feel like I have a team so, I don't know what word would that be. Uh, I feel like I have a team, I feel like I have a support system, support, I feel like I have a support system. I feel like it's accomplishable...I mean I still feel stressed too but it's a different type of stress.”

This finding is consistent with current literature on doctoral student socialization that reveals feelings of ambiguity, isolation, loneliness, and self-doubt felt by student. However, literature rarely discusses when these feelings are encountered. Thus, these findings indicate that these factors that influence doctoral students’ socialization may occur at periods of low social interactions as revealed by the part-time doctoral students’ account of their social interaction experience at the beginning and end of their program.
**Positive Feelings During Periods of Higher Levels of Social Interactions**

When asked about the level of social interactions at the end of their program, a consensus in responses revealed that participants, irrespective of previous inhibitions for socializing, experienced greater levels of social interactions than was experienced at the beginning. Furthermore, this was met with positive adjectives to describe the social interactions that occurred.

> **P1:** Then this year, for some reason, Spring, Summer, and Fall, I don't know, I decided to make friends, so I did, which was kind of strange. Now, at the end of my last semester of coursework, I talk to anyone who will listen. I don’t particularly care if they want to listen or not. Neither am I worried about what anyone thinks of me. Part of that, I think, is due to my relationships with several peers, and another part is based on my relationships with faculty... I'm done, and I have friends now.

> **P2:** ...and now that I'm further into the program, I have met a couple of people, I mean literally, that has been in the last year or so, that I've met, you know, people in the actual doctoral program...I do have people that I can text or call and actually get to that actually understand the issues that grad students deal with. So, now I can say my actual colleagues and fellow students, but I did not have that at first... we're actually interacting with people from all different departments within, that are at that stage in their dissertation...now, everybody's honest and you know, you've overcome most of the classes...So, it's probably the comfort level too, because you you've conquered the bulk of it, so you can have an opinion... mean I still feel stressed too but it's a different type of stress.

> **P3:** “Now that I'm getting towards the end, I kind of prefer the more social learning environment a little bit just because we are all kind of working towards that common goal... At this stage of my program, the social interaction piece is clearly a benefit.”

**Challenges with Social Interactions Relate to Institutional Factors**

Challenges related to social interactions experienced by participants generally involved institutional factors. P1 expressed disconnects with connecting with peers (which might be due to her private personality), sharing challenges related to the distance to campus with P2 who had to juggle the demands of children and maintaining presence on campus. Additionally, P2 indicated difficulties with developing relationship with faculty early on and shared challenges with P3 related to communicating with professors and staff, as well as receiving necessary communication about departmental/program deadlines and events. Finally, P3’s unique experience as a student with the majority of courses taken online, reflected on the challenges with online instructors that had different styles of teaching, suggesting that if the social interactions had been available in the online environment in the beginning, it would have had an impact.

**Social Interactions by Academic Sources Provide Support and Encouragement in Times of Need**

Discussing the benefits of their social interaction experiences, interactions with faculty were of source of encouragement during periods of self-doubt for P1. While P2 and P3 shared the benefit of opportunities for collaboration with peers and faculty, serving as a source of expressing feelings, idea generation, encouragement, and problem solving.
P1: “Faculty 1] and [faculty 2] have always boosted my confidence, which helped me to understand that I could continue in and finish the program. They have always been impressed with my writing skills, which made me feel like I could finish the program when I got tired and overwhelmed. [Faculty 1] suggested peers with whom I should interact, as he recognized my tendency to isolate myself, and he pushed me to make friends when I didn’t want to.”

P2: “...us working together in class, just to have, in that encouragement for us to collaborate has actually, helped us to piggyback off of each other's ideas and it has ... allowed us to actually now be honest about how we feel about things...the thing about the students in the doctoral program, we encourage each other; and that to me, and you need that encouragement from somebody who actually understands the struggle.”

P3: “When I'm starting to focus down the research and I need to bounce ideas off of somebody, or I need to hear what they're doing and that helps to think about something that I'm doing...It's the interaction in this course that actually helps me get through a lot of these problems, rather than sitting in a quiet room and thinking about it out by myself.”

Benefits of Social Interactions at Stage 2 regardless of Source,

Reflection about the overall value and meaning (essence) of social interactions in the educational experience of the part-time doctoral participants revealed the common acknowledgement that social interactions were beneficial, although the perspectives shared were different. On the exterior, P1 seemed to fluctuate on the importance of social interactions, commenting on one hand that “I don’t tend to need a lot of social interaction at all, let alone when I spend almost all my time interacting with students and colleagues,” and on the other hand “I am glad I pushed myself to make friends, even if it is so close to the end of my program.”

These differing positions were held, not recognizing that the accounts of positive interactions with faculty, as much as the insistence that more time is spent interacting with P1’s students and colleagues is, in fact, engaging in social interactions. Furthermore, in several instances, P1 acknowledged and reflected on the positive experiences with interacting with students in the latter part of the program, despite naturally being a private individual.

P2 shared strong viewpoints on the meaning of social interactions, rating the level of importance as “it's like off the Richter scale because I mean, it affects your self-esteem, it affects you mentally, it's emotional, it's physical, it's a mental. All of those things, you need that...it's like gas to an empty car. You need that to keep pushing through this, because this is hard.” Overall, P2 recognized that social interactions, despite not existing in the beginning, in the end, they were of much value. In the same way, in hindsight, P3 acknowledged the value of the social interactions that were not there at the beginning of the program, as a result of the nature of the program, and rating the level of interaction from one to ten (being the highest), noted that “Overall, I'd probably say a six. If you would’ve asked me before this semester, I probably would've said a two...”. This comes with the realization that social interaction is necessary when preparing for an extensive project as the dissertation.

P1: “I am glad pushed myself to make friends, even if it is so close to the end of my program. It is easier to ask people about assignments when I miss class, and it’s nice to be able to commiserate with people about assignments. I have a hard time with small talk, so I’m not very
good at making friends, and really, I have so much social interaction daily, that I didn't feel the need to make time for more social interaction in the program. My family relationships have always been more important to me than peer relationships and living so far from campus makes me focus less on peer relationships.”

P2: “As a part-time student, it has been tough. I can't say it hasn't, it's been tough, it's been stressful, it's been long, it's been enduring... I think social interaction is important... and I'm torn between was it that not having it that made me realize, when I did have it, how important it was...I mean, I think it would be great to have it from day one. Right, as a part time student, I think it helps physically, emotionally and mentally, because we all need to know that we're in this or not alone... It helps you to feel like you're not the only one going through this. It's just relatable. It's relatable, it's real, and that's what you need. You need relatable and real..., it's priceless to have those interactions.”

P3: Really, outside of this semester, social interaction has really been null, just because of the nature of my program. But I guess you can go back to the last academic year, because I have had more face-to-face classes that I've had ever, through our program, because of the nature of the classes I'm taking now” ...but, you need this social interaction with this course, when you go into a project as massive as a dissertation. But if you ask me a year from now, it might be an eight. Right now, it's at a six.

Discussion
In summary, the findings of the study revealed that social interactions are an important element of the educational experience of part-time doctoral students, with various sources identified as supporting these needs at different stages. Though upon reflection, some participants realized the potential benefit of interactions if available in earlier stages of their program; however, in general, participants were satisfied with their interaction experiences. The results also supported other findings reported in the literature about students’ perspectives of the doctoral experience. For example, relating to socialization challenges, participants shared their experiences of feelings of ambiguity, isolations self-doubt, and loneliness. A unique contribution to literature from this study is the stage at which participants experienced these challenges, and their connection to the earlier stages of the doctoral program.

Moreover, it was observed that differences in the level of social interaction occurred at different stages, with less at the beginning and greater levels of interaction experienced at the end of the program. This finding is consistent with current literature; however, the desires for higher levels of interaction at the beginning of the program, as expressed by participants, is worth exploring in future research.

The unique experience of the part-time doctoral education participants revealed a strong influence of co-workers and family in acting in supportive roles, and a need to develop stronger interactions with faculty, peers, and institutional members. These findings provide a basis for further exploration of the role that social interactions play in the socialization experience of part-time doctoral students, as social interactions are a significant to the part-time doctoral student’s development and educational experience. Future findings can provide evidence that indicate ways that doctoral programs can better support the needs of part-time students to ensure retention and successful completion of academic requirements.
Although, the sample size used in the current study presents limitations, the research inquiry provided an opportunity for investigation as a pilot study for future research. With a small sample size, representativeness of the sample is limited but consistent with a phenomenological approach. Also, although purposive sampling techniques were employed, time constraints limited the sample of potential participants to those who were enrolled in the dissertation course during one fall semester. Finally, the interviewing, coding, analysis, and interpretation of the results were conducted by the author, who is a full-time doctoral student, potentially contributing to bias. However, every effort was made to retain heightened awareness of bias throughout the process. Additionally, strict adherence to the prescriptions of the theoretical framework and Grover’s (2007) definition of stage two as guidelines for analyzing and interpreting findings, helped to address some limitations. Despite these limitations, insights gained about the importance of social interactions among part-time doctoral students that occur with individuals both inside and outside the formal educational context provides some evidence for further exploration of the phenomenon, as well as reveals unmet socialization needs of this unique group of doctoral students.

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