What Graduate Students Say About Their Preparation for
Doing Qualitative Dissertations: A Pilot Study
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I. Introduction

This pilot study is a collaborative work. Our objective is to examine how doctoral students experience their preparation for doing qualitative dissertations. It responds to a growing concern in this field that dissertations in education may lack rigor in comparison to those in the humanities and sciences. Based on responses to the reflective papers presented last year at AERA in a panel like this, titled, *Getting good at qualitative research*, we decided to interview other doctoral students and add their reflections to this follow-up panel. Research in higher education, as in research in K–12 education, often neglects student voices. Today, we focus on student voices in our attempt to articulate how doctoral students get good at qualitative research.

We came up with three interview questions:

1. Please describe your methodological training in qualitative research during your doctoral program.
2. Please identify and describe significant cognitive and emotional milestones in your growth as a qualitative researcher during your doctoral studies.
3. Please describe those resources that supported and impeded your development during the dissertation process.

In the interviews, we also asked participants to talk about their research and how they came to do a Ph.D. in education. The interviews were approximately 30–60 minutes long each.

We interviewed eleven qualitative researchers, two nearly finished with their doctoral program, two having finished less than a year prior to the interview, and seven having finished one to five years prior to the interview. They came from five different universities, two on the West Coast and three on the East. Their programs ranged from very systematic approaches to methodological training, for example, requiring a year of qualitative methodology course work, to programs requiring none, but offering some courses in qualitative methodology. Ours is a sample of convenience, meaning we interviewed researchers with whom we were able to make contact and who were willing to be interviewed. As it turns out, all eleven participants are women.

The four researchers on this project read through the eleven interview transcripts. We then each came up with and passed around a concept memo; in other words, each was free to conduct the first round of analysis as she or he saw fit. Our memos represented four different lenses through which one might look at the data, yet many common themes also arose. At this point in our research, two of us lived in Northern California, one in Southern California, and one in Massachusetts. After months of e-mail, we got together to talk by means of a long distance conference call. We discussed our observations and ideas, and we sought ways in which to present what we were learning in a cogent and relevant form. That conference call and other
conversations have given us the chance to explore our “virtuous subjectivity,”” to use Peshkin’s words. Each of us have reflected time and time again on the role of our subjectivity in research. We also know each other and each other’s work. Thus, we were able to recognize not only our own subjectivity at work, but also each other’s.

What we found compelling in the data were not only the ideas that we saw represented over and over again in the transcripts. Rather, using what Eisner calls consensual validation, or “agreement among competent others that the description, interpretation, evaluation, and thematics of an educational situation are right” (Eisner, 1991, p. 112), we identified three sections that characterize concerns and generate recommendations. We selected passages from interview transcripts that brought these sections to life and wrote about them. We critiqued each others work during a second conference call, made final changes to our drafts, then compiled the document we present today.

The sections are: prior preparation, for example, those tools and experiences students bring with them to their doctoral programs; formal preparation, for example, those tools and experiences students glean from course work or other institutionally-sanctioned venues; and entrepreneurial preparation, for example, those tools and experiences students go out and get on their own during their doctoral programs. While each of these three sections has pros and cons regarding its usefulness in students’ growth as qualitative researchers, we found that the voice of students’ dissatisfaction with their preparation was relatively low in the cases of prior preparation, higher in the cases of formal preparation, and notably higher still, in the cases of entrepreneurial preparation.

Our approach to analysis was clearly inductive and iterative. These terms seem less than adequate in their descriptiveness of our analysis, yet we find no additional terms or methodological foundations for qualitative analysis upon which to poise our study. This experience appears to be paralleled among responses in this small sample. The novice researchers we interviewed bemoaned a lack of attention to data analysis and to writing in their qualitative methods courses. It is in this context that we, novice qualitative researchers ourselves, present one example of qualitative inquiry into successes and failures in the preparation of doctoral students in education.

II. Prior Preparation

One of our findings is that doctoral students do not begin their formal research preparation as blank slates. Not surprisingly, those interviewed came to graduate school with a range of prior experiences that appeared to matter in the overall preparation experience for doctoral students. We identified three themes in our sample. First, students arrived with diverse attitudes about qualitative research; second, students began with different conceptions what the enterprise of
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research is about; and, third, students began their formal preparation already possessing a broad range of skills and competencies related to the conduct of qualitative research.

Diverse attitudes towards qualitative research

First, in our interviews it appeared that even before students took their first methodology class in their doctoral program students described varying degrees of sympathy and interest with what might be described as a qualitative mindset. This preference resembles what Howard Becker (1996) describes as a qualitative epistemology as opposed to a quantitative epistemology.

In our interviews, we found several students who came to graduate school with a well-developed orientation towards qualitative thought. These respondents described how comfortable they felt observing, describing, and interpreting the world with a qualitative orientation.

Shelby described this sensibility: “I came to graduate school already someone who looked and listened carefully… I very much had that orientation of wanting to pursue answers, if you will, to authentic questions that that came straight from my classroom.” Jennifer, who was a literature major in college said, “I came to graduate school believing I can’t stand anything quantitative, so it never crossed my mind to do anything but a qualitative dissertation. I’m… a humanities English type person. And so I knew that I wanted to do something that’s interpretive, coming out of English literature I just sort of transposed that framework for analysis onto my research.” Her interview was chock full of descriptions of how her disposition towards literature, art, and interpretation transferred smoothly into her evolution as a qualitative researcher. Emily, who was an occupational therapist before she returned to graduate school, also clearly felt drawn to qualitative research:

I’m a more qualitative person in general. I’m realizing this as I’ve gone through. I think partially because of my training as an occupational therapist. But I shouldn’t say it’s just that. It’s part of my worldview about individual perspectives and that goes with qualitative as opposed to measuring and counting and that sort of thing.

While Jennifer, Shelby and Emily describe a comfortable link between their qualitative mindset and their graduate school preparation, several other interviews revealed that the transition could be jarring for some not accustomed to a qualitative mindset. Karen captures this tension when she talks about her first methods class:

That first class was like, “This isn’t real research!” [emphasis in interview]…. One student did a presentation her ethnography and she was saying how her

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1 Becker distinguishes qualitative researchers as being more comfortable with unanticipated findings and more attentive to describing the particulars of relationships in the everyday world from quantitative researchers who focus more on inferring differences between these relationships.
research questions changed after she gathered the data. And I’m like, ‘You can’t do that! [laughs] And so it was a real relearning process. I had to really be opened…. It was like it opened up a new way of thinking for me.

Amy’s also described beginning her preparation with a discomfort in “qualitative thinking”. Amy came to graduate school with some exposure to qualitative research and was skeptical of its ability to identify clear differences between variables. She described this tension as a real factor in the kind of research she hoped to be able to do in the future. “I was not satisfied with the results because it [qualitative research] doesn’t, it really didn’t tell me much, like significant differences between the two, so I didn’t know what it really means.”

**Diverse conceptions about the purposes of research**

Students also began their research preparation with diverse conceptions of what the purpose of research was. They ranged from Zoe’s candid response, “I didn’t know anything the research issue at all,” to Rachel who had taken methodology courses as a master’s degree student and had worked as a research assistant for a national educational research organization.

Several respondents who had been teachers described beginning their preparation with a belief that the purpose of educational research was to solve questions that bubbled up from the classroom. Shelby said, “I had lots of questions as a classroom teacher…. I became interested in pursuing some of those questions that were emerging from my own classroom. I came with questions from my classroom practice. So I very much had the orientation of wanting to pursue answers, if you will, to authentic questions that had come straight from my classroom.”

Another perspective is offered by Jessie, who describes coming to graduate school with no desire to do research. Instead, she describes being driven to learn how to be an educated consumer of research.

> This is probably not what people want to hear. I didn’t want to be an academic; I didn’t want to be a researcher. I wanted to understand how good educational research is done because my ultimate interest is public education and what can we do to improve public education for all students, for all kids…. I want to know what it took to do good research, what bad research looked like, how to be able to consume it better.

**Beginning preparation with a diverse range of research skills**

Our respondents described beginning their research preparation with a varied repertoire of skills and competencies in research methods. These skills were often obtained through their prior experiences as teachers, occupational therapists, and humanities students, rather than through conducting research in prior settings. The case of Shelby is illustrative of this theme. Shelby
came to graduate school after 12 years of teaching.

My orientation as classroom teacher was very much participant observer kind. I was always keeping records anecdotal records, lots of qualitative descriptive records on children, the kinds of reporting that I had done for a decade of my teaching was all narrative in terms of evaluation and assessment. I didn’t do report cards. So I feel like I had a lot “on the job training” looking and listening in classrooms just from all of those years as a classroom teacher, but for me, that came about because of the kind of training I had had as a student teacher. And the kind of modeling that was done for me and the ways that I was supervised as a student teacher. So a lot of my early skills, I think as a qualitative researcher came right out of my 12 years experience as a classroom teacher, because that was so much of my orientation and I didn’t realize that until later, when I began to see a lot of transference of those skills and realized that I sort of knew a lot of this.

Other respondents shared similar experiences. Rachel described how her experience as a peer counselor provided her with a “real sense about asking questions and listening to answers and picking up on things that didn’t make sense.” Jennifer described how her framework for analysis comes straight from her training in the humanities and literature.

In sum, we found that our interviewees began their formal research preparation with different attitudes about qualitative research, diverse conceptions of what constitutes research and a broad variety of skills and competencies related to the conduct of research. The prior experiences of doctoral students in education may be particularly important to because many graduate students are older and come to their graduate experiences with rich and salient experiences that can be built upon in their formal preparation experiences.

III. Formal preparation of the researcher

All of our respondents received some amount of formal preparation in qualitative research methodology during their doctoral programs. Such preparation came from two sources: (1) coursework, and (2) apprenticeships with and/or mentoring from faculty members.

Coursework

Our respondents took varying numbers of courses in qualitative methods and research design. In addition, some content courses (for example, a course on research on teaching) provided information relevant to a developing researcher. These courses served a number of purposes to our respondents: they provided a history of the field of qualitative research, practical strategies for conducting research, tools for interpreting literature, and, occasionally, the opportunity to
reflect on oneself in a research setting. Rather than enumerate all of these issues, this section highlights three aspects of coursework that multiple respondents identified as important: the sequence of preparation, important skills and tools, and missing elements.

We begin, however, with the case of Jennifer, who was unusual in our sample as describing a systematic and sophisticated program of preparation for doing qualitative research.

Jennifer’s coursework began with an introduction to ethnography that “did a lot of looking at what the theoretical assumptions and procedures and standards of quality… are for qualitative research.” The class, which she described both as “an overview” and as a stepping stone for students intending to use qualitative research methods, examined a number of perspectives on qualitative research and encouraged students to reflect on their own assumptions. Jennifer’s subsequent courses honed particular skills relevant to becoming a qualitative researcher. A class on research on teaching illuminated issues of question formation (“the question you asked certainly influences what you see, influences what you find, it’s part of the critical parameters that you set on something”). A second year writing course focused on the development and critique of dissertation proposals, building on the work in the introductory class. Finally, the school offered an advanced qualitative data analysis course designed for students in the midst of their dissertation research. The course was grounded in students’ own research and the professor helped them think about alternative perspectives for analyzing the data.

A number of the features of Jennifer’s course of study show up in the other transcripts. However, in terms of sequence, content, and comprehensiveness, the other programs show more inconsistencies than does this example.

The sequence of preparation: All of our respondents were required to take at least one course dealing with qualitative research. Such courses were often surveys of techniques and approaches. Dawn said she learned “[t]he different approaches, the breadth of approaches. What is qualitative research? Why is it used. How it answers certain questions.” However, Jennifer’s description of a sequence of courses building on the introductory course was unusual among our respondents. Many courses, including some introductory ones, seemed designed to exhibit the professor’s ideological niche or methodological preferences. Both Grace and Emily felt limited by the heavy emphasis on grounded theory in their first course; such an emphasis kept them uninformed about other approaches to qualitative research and, perhaps more importantly, it failed to give them a framework for understanding the purposes and epistemologies of various approaches to research. Caitlyn’s program required students, after the introductory course, to choose between two advanced sequences of methods courses: quantitative and qualitative.
Within this [research] department, they really believed in two kinds of research, quantitative and qualitative, so you had your choice when you began, of either taking the qualitative strand or the quantitative strand... So the first quarter everybody had to take both, take qualitative A and quantitative A. But then after that, for the next two years, you could decide which strand to follow.

Amy and Karen were in the same program and described the same decision point.

Tools and skills: A number of respondents described the value in analytically dissecting published studies in an attempt to understand the logic of the research design and the methods used. Grace described a course on research on teaching in this way:

We had to really see what was out there and see how we could interpret the research and you know, why is this research important? What do other people find important about it? What are the assumptions? What are the conclusions? What body of inquiry is driving this and who’s asking these questions and why are they asking these questions?... It set the stage for us to be able to interpret what were reading. Conceptually interpret what we were reading.

Zoe described a similar experience with the same course, and Shelby and Jennifer talked about similar courses. Among other things, these courses had the effect of demystifying academic language and conventions of research. One student, Dawn, bemoaned the absence of this type of analysis of published research from her preparation.

Beyond this skill, respondents highlighted several other tools and skills that their courses provided. These included conducting pilot studies which helped them advance their own work, learning the mechanics of data collection, and examinations of research designs.

Missing elements: Amy articulated a hole in her coursework that others echoed. “To be honest with you, in this school... we just talked [about] how to collect the data, and gain access. They didn’t really teach much how to analyze data.” This inattention to data analysis, as well as to writing and interpretation, was problematic in that students needed particular help with these aspects of the research process. As Rachel said:

I remember when I first saw Miles and Huberman [‘s Qualitative Data Analysis], I was halfway through my analysis, and I was like, my god, someone should have shown me this in advance, because I had to recreate exactly some of the things that they were talking about.

Karen and Emily both described teaching themselves data-analysis techniques; Jessie and Rachel developed analysis skills working on faculty-led research projects.
In addition, the descriptions of courses belied an emphasis on developing skills and techniques, with less attention to more reflective aspects of preparation, such as developing the identity of the researcher and learning to understand one’s subjectivity. Dawn, for example, said that she used her own time as her primary opportunity for reflection. Jennifer, again, provides an important counter-example:

I realized how much of the self has to be taken into consideration in... a project like this. And you really come up against that in every step of the way. You have to look at yourself as much as you have to look [at] anything else... It made me realize and other people in the class that it is always you who are looking... Every time you see something you also have to think about the fact that your shaping what you see. It’s sort of a raising of the self-awareness and sometimes self-consciousness. I think that a lot of people don’t necessarily think about that otherwise.

**Mentoring and apprentice relationships with faculty**

Unsurprisingly, respondents described relationships with faculty members as critical to their cognitive and emotional development. Those experiences varied tremendously in quality, ranging from “very helpful” to “obstructionist.” The degree of variation in the quality of relationships in our very small sample is striking. Grace described her advisor as a role model with whom she developed a strong personal connection. By contrast, other students described traumatic experiences with professors that “absolutely crippled me for years.” Said Jennifer, “I used to be able to write before I went in to do my Ph.D.”

Experiences with faculty members also varied in kind. Faculty served a number of roles, three of which we elaborate here: (1) They served as *mentors* on various aspects of the research process. For example, one of Dawn’s professors used grant money to develop data analysis seminars; “it was faculty and students, everyone was talking about research, and everyone had to come with data.” (2) They served as *models* for research conduct. For Jessie, working on a faculty-led project opened up the black box of site selection process and other aspects of research. (3) They served as *cheerleaders*. This cheerleading role proved quite powerful to a number of respondents, including Dawn, who pointed to an important conversation she had with a faculty member who was a notorious critic.

We sat and talked for an hour, then for the last 15 minutes, she started getting interested in what I was talking about, excited in what I was talking about... She said, “the first 45 minutes? Not interesting. These three things are really interesting, that you told me that you saw and experienced.” And that was my first chapter... And it was that dialogue that freed me up. It got me excited about writing, actually, which is unusual because I hate writing.
For Dawn, as well as for Grace, such experiences were catalysts for their dissertation work. For each of the roles described above—mentor, model, and cheerleader—we also had examples of students who felt that their advisors and other faculty members did not play those roles.

**What students took away**

Students took a number of lessons away from their formal preparation. Zoe, for example, developed a stronger identity as a researcher as a result of a course on participatory action research: “that class gave me a sense of myself as a researcher as something, as someone other than collecting data and running it through an analysis, and then writing about it.” As another example, Caitlyn developed an understanding of multiple perspectives: “Understanding that there was very different views, different ways of looking at something. And that also gave me a better understanding, a better valuing of diversity, and of bilingual education.” And many students took away a toolkit of research strategies.

However, despite these learnings, feelings of frustration echoed through the students’ descriptions of their qualitative research preparation, describing it as weak, terribly inadequate, very lacking, fairly inadequate, a huge impediment, and a feeling of no formal training. Students remarked upon several different aspects of their experiences in which they perceived a need for improvement when discussing their preparation in qualitative methodologies. Zoe commented that she did not feel appropriately guided through the research process by her professorial committee members. Dawn commented that the textbook-orientation of the methodology courses did not suit her as a learner and that more field experience would have helped her to learn how to do research. Jesse described her courses as only an introduction to methodologies, lacking depth and not providing her an opportunity to build a sufficient level of confidence in what she learned in the courses. Others also spoke about shortcomings in courses they completed, particularly commenting on not feeling adequately prepared to apply methods learned in class, interpret data and results of qualitative research in the literature, and not learning how to analyze their own data. Finally, Grace looked back on her experience as one in which she really did not know what she needed to know about qualitative inquiry after she completed her coursework; she did not know what the expectations were for her own research; and she did not know what the product of her research was supposed to entail until she found guidance from a professor.

The next section explores students’ responses to what they did—and did not—learn in their formal preparation.
IV. Improvised Preparation

The students in this study described several strategies and opportunities that they either turned to or created for themselves to fill the gaps they felt their programs left open in their methodological preparation. These entrepreneurial moves by the students took on several different forms: seeking research experiences; finding allies among faculty and knowledgeable others; creating support groups; taking advantage of alternative programs; and supplementing course work with reading. Dawn summarized: “when you don’t believe you know a lot, you go get as much help as you can.”

Seeking and undertaking research experiences

Emily strongly remarked that “if they say that the actual dissertation is an independent research project, it shouldn’t be your first [research project].” Not all of the students in this study had opportunities to work on research projects under the guidance of an experienced researcher prior to embarking on their independent research for their dissertation. To gain these experiences, students sought out and found opportunities to work on research projects conducted at their universities. Emily, Dawn, Jesse, and Rachel described the benefits of being part of a research team and having the opportunity to see research decisions being made in real projects.

Being a member of a research team offered the students an opportunity to work collaboratively. Collaboration made learning the processes of research a social endeavor, providing the students with an opportunity to talk through their analyses and gauge their own interpretations against the interpretation of others. Dawn commented:

I think I learned a lot more when I was actually asked to be part of a research group… Getting together and sitting around a table for four hours talking about the different perspectives and the different interviews… I wish I could have done that in my own dissertation. That was so— “wow, I saw that too,” “you know what, they did say that.” Things I wouldn’t think to mention, someone else would mention… that’s a social process. It’s really important.

Jesse likened the work as a research assistant to the work of an apprentice, an opportunity to witness first hand the inner-workings of a research project:

A big resource was working on faculty-led research projects, doing the actual research as an apprentice, if you want to put it that way. I learned a tremendous amount by doing that…. I think it helped to see how high or low standards can be in terms of what educational research can be. How are research questions developed, how are methodologies developed, how are sites selected, how are surveys developed, how are interview protocols developed. It was just good to see
In traditional apprenticeships, the apprentice learns the trade by watching the visible work of the master. In a cognitive apprenticeship, the apprentice must learn the complex cognitive acts of the master such as decision-making and analysis, that are usually invisible at the surface. The challenge for the master in cognitive apprenticeships is to make what is usually invisible visible. There are four fundamental processes that make up cognitive apprenticeships: modeling, scaffolding, fading, and coaching. Modeling behavior allows the learner to observe those performances he or she will be conducting later on. As the students become more practiced at the performances the teacher gradually begins to ‘fade’ out. Coaching, however, does not end; coaching continues as a means of refining the practice, for even the most skilled performers benefit from coaching as we often see in professional athletics, music, and dance.

Rachel described her relationship with a professor on her committee as if she were coaching her through the process of analysis and writing:

the professor who I got on my committee who was my outside professor, ended up being a really important person to the process for me…. She didn’t spend that much time with me, but every time she spent time with me, it was very useful, gave me something very concrete, and always moved me to the next place…. She was really helpful in clarifying what was important and what was not. She was helpful in narrowing my question and focus in. And she was helpful in telling me when I had done enough on one part of the analysis, I should move on. And also... I guess... in helping me look at it from a different perspective, when I got lost in the shuffle in all the stuff….She read my stuff at times that were very critical, when my other people were just kind of signing off.

Students also got a feel for the “messiness” of the research process by working on research projects. Dawn commented:

…hearing the professor talk about all the mistakes they made in that study, how they collected about ten times as much data as they should have, how it they could have gotten so much more from the survey and then they almost didn’t use it all. That frees you up to both try something and allow yourself not to use it. That was very important, having professors as well as peers expose those practices.

This taste of real research practices left this student feeling reassured about conducting her own work, removing the mythos of the perfect design and the perfect set of data.

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Finding and cultivating allies among faculty and knowledgeable others

Students crafted mentor relationships with a variety of people, not always depending solely on their dissertation committee for guidance and support in their development as researchers. These relationships developed with committee members, education professors not on their committee, professors not in the school of education, writing tutors, other graduate students, and specialists at other institutions.

Reasons for creating these relationships varied as well, but all seemed to fill a gap that the students identified in their development as researchers. For Karen, her dissertation chair shared the same methodological interest and she “was a great person to dialogue with” while figuring out the research design and implementation. For Grace, her dissertation chair shared a common life history with her, having also pursued her Ph.D. in her mid-40’s. For her, “it was very much a personal connection that we made…. I felt that this woman was very much in my corner.” Emily, also coming to graduate school in her 40’s found a connection with a professor who showed her respect. When talking about finding a faculty mentor for her dissertation research, she said: “I think that one of the things with her skills is just her respect in treating doctoral students with some dignity. I hadn’t been getting that from a different professor who was my academic advisor so when all of a sudden somebody treats you with dignity and respect, you kind of listen up immediately. You know, you have to remember, I came in at 45 with a lot of experience…” Dawn described her thirst for talking with people about her work so she could reflect her ideas off of others who shared her interests: “I sought out the researchers I wanted to work with. They weren’t on my committee. A lot of researchers who influenced the design of my study just aren’t on my committee…. I would just go after professors and say, “please, talk to me” and I would talk to them about my research.” Finally, Jennifer, who described a dysfunctional relationship with her own advisor expressed a sense of surprise and relief that she found someone “who actually helps you and is supportive and gives you opportunities to do things.”

Creating and relying on student support groups

The ubiquitous strategy that the students in this study reported was finding or creating support groups and relying on them for critique, emotional support, as a place to vent, a place to clarify understandings and language, and as an opportunity to learn from each other’s work. The constitution of these groups varies, as does the purpose for the group according to the descriptions offered by the students in this study. Table 1 summarizes the variety of who constitutes the groups, the purposes of the groups, the activities of the groups, and what the groups are called.
Table 1. Varieties of support groups described by students.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who constitutes the group?</th>
<th>Why is the group created?</th>
<th>What are the activities of the group?</th>
<th>What do they call the group?</th>
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<tr>
<td>- Peers</td>
<td>- We bonded</td>
<td>- Meeting regularly</td>
<td>- Dissertation support group</td>
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<td>- Cohort</td>
<td>- Needed help writing</td>
<td>- Read drafts</td>
<td>- Writing group</td>
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<td>- Friends</td>
<td>- Sense of not being abandoned</td>
<td>- Learn how to analyze data</td>
<td>- Support group</td>
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<td>- Like-minded people</td>
<td>- Emotional support</td>
<td>- Talk informally</td>
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<td>- Someone who shares research interests</td>
<td>- Encouragement</td>
<td>- Learn about the norms of the profession</td>
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<tr>
<td>- People with same political difficulties</td>
<td>- Reassurance</td>
<td>- Talk, laugh, and tell jokes</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Hired assistant</td>
<td>- Share strategies [esp. political]</td>
<td>- Eat and drink together</td>
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<td>- Members of the qualitative research course</td>
<td>- Model for working collaboratively</td>
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<td>- Socializing</td>
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<td>- Having someone to talk to on an ongoing basis</td>
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<td>- Reduce isolation</td>
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Italics are quoted from transcripts

Jesse’s experience is illustrative of the variety of purposes that a group served for students in the study:

…developing a network of grad. students who are approximately at the same stage in their dissertation process and working and meeting with them regularly. I mean it hasn’t been like a book; it hasn’t been one course. It’s been the process of finding a network of people to sort of work through that process with me. That’s been the most helpful…. it’s helped me with just the mechanics of how to go through thinking about, writing about all of the data that’s supposed to become a coherent product that’s then a contribution to the literature. I think it’s just really helpful to have people who are going through that process, going through similar struggles, learning from their struggles, supporting each other. So that’s been from a very logistical sanity management, support process…These regular meetings
with the dissertation group force me to do some assessment of my progress, where I am, what I’m doing, what I think about the findings, what other data I need to get, so it’s been a structured way for me to reflect on [my research].

In addition to creating environments that offered support for themselves as they progressed through their degree program, Jennifer and Grace also expressed a desire to reach out and help others get through the process:

There’s so much sort of secrecy and isolation around this and not a lot of people who have gone through go back and try to help the people behind them get through it, so I really try to do that.

In fact, when the entire process was over, I felt so strongly about what I had gone through that I wanted to offer to teach a course on how to write a dissertation. I wanted to give people the low-down.

Participating in and benefitting from complementary research methods programs

In addition to student-created support groups, Dawn and Shelby described two examples of alternative programs that provide groups with an opportunity to meet at regular intervals to discuss qualitative research methods. Both of these programs were initiated by professors.

Dawn described a grant-supported program that a professor created around qualitative methodological issues. Both students commented positively about the organized retreats sponsored by this professor and the “research days” the professor hosted at her home:

I went on two retreats where everyone just talked about methodology…. it was faculty and students, everyone was talking about research, and everyone had to come with data. So, we got to see pieces of data and how people were organizing and worked together to organize it…. she had one a year or maybe two a year, and then research days where she had people over at her house. I went to probably three or four of those. They were really great…. A lot of people didn’t take advantage of them. I did because I was so desperate to figure out what to do. Again, it was exposing practice, it was the community of practice notion that you really learn through people around you at different levels or stages of the game.

Shelby described monthly gatherings organized by her advisor around student presentations and critique of their work at a different university:

My advisor, every month, would host a gathering for her doctoral students at her house. And we took turns presenting our work. And so we would generate among all of us sort of a support, certainly it was a support network, but we would also
generate at every one of these meetings, a whole new plan of action, not new, but a plan of action for the person presenting to think about in terms of either further refinement or new questions or new directions or thinking about a particular piece of the methodology. So we did that for each other with her leadership.

Supplementing course work with reading

Some students reported that their courses used a variety of methodological texts to guide students through research processes. Others, however, were not exposed to such readings in courses, but were guided to such resources by individual professors or other graduate students. Some students reported that they relied on written resources essentially to teach themselves about research methodologies because their course work had focused narrowly on particular methods or had focused on research reports rather than research strategies. For example, Grace made sense of the dissertation process by reading a variety of methods books, models of proposals, and completed dissertations:

I just read. I read, and I read, and I read, and then I read some more. And this is how I learned what a proposal looked like, what a dissertation looked like, how to write, what the little nuances are in terms of professional discourse. I just read. That really was how I put it all together and started to get a sense for what it was that I would eventually create.

Amy indicated that the teaching of qualitative methods courses did not address data analysis, leaving her to teach herself by reading methods books and research articles:

I tried to teach myself. Miles and Huberman, that’s my best book. And then I just tried to figure it out for myself, [how to] do an interview and then, I think the analysis part is more important. But that’s the biggest challenge for me…. Nobody [taught] me how to analyze the data…. so I tried to teach myself, through reading a lot of articles, [but] they didn’t really talk much [about] the process of analysis and collecting the data

Karen supplemented her methodological course work when she wanted to pursue a particular method that was not taught at their university: “I had to self teach grounded theory analysis, which I love, but they didn’t have any course on that at all.”

Closing thoughts

Students have described taking quite a bit of initiative in creating learning opportunities for themselves that will allow them to at least successfully complete their dissertation, and possibly go on to conduct high quality, rigorous research. The perceived need to supplement, embellish,
add to, remediate, create, and cobble together a program that meets the needs of a developing researcher raises many questions about the current state of these students’ research preparation. If these eleven students felt the need to be entrepreneurs in creating their own learning experiences to ensure the most fundamental of understandings about qualitative research methodologies, we must ask what price students who are not so entrepreneurial are paying. The following questions are only the beginning for raising concern:

1. What benefits do students get from the need to be independent in their learning?
2. What are the drawbacks when students have to be independent in their learning?
3. Who gets left out when students must fend for themselves in their own learning opportunities?
4. Does this system favor certain individuals who have particular backgrounds or backgrounds and harm others who need more guidance?

V. Concluding Comments

From this sample of eleven experiences of qualitative research preparation at five research universities, the general tenor of responses indicates students were generally disappointed in the quality or preparation they had received and, in particular, were critical of design of the preparation program. The disappointment on the part of students converges with what might be described as a general disappointment in the quality of qualitative doctoral research being done in our graduate schools. At Stanford, a five-year Spencer Foundation Grant is being used to address perceived shortcomings in doctoral preparation and training. The proposal that was funded described, among other issues, that dissertation proposals from the school of education were “vague, poorly formulated, and lacking in analytic rigor” in comparison to those in the humanities and sciences.

Given what we learned, we offer four suggestions for consideration by those committed to helping prepare novice qualitative researcher in education:

* **First, initial research preparation** might focus on developing a conceptual understanding of the generic principles of research and disciplined inquiry. Importantly, there was a degree of consensus around the most effective method to achieve this understanding. Respondents highlighted how the close reading and systematic analysis of published research studies provided an accessible path to understanding principles of research, methods, and design decisions.

* **Second, the overall qualitative preparation experience most respondents experienced can be characterized as haphazard rather than systematic.** We suggest that departments of education develop a systematic and sequential program of research preparation focused on
the mission of preparing qualitative researchers. This means a course sequence that has integrity and is developed to support doctoral students who do move through a predictable series of milestones. If coursework can be designed to support students as they encounter each milestone along the process, it would include the following: Survey courses that provide an overview of the principles and purposes of research. Many respondents articulated frustrations about being what was described as a “survey courses” but in reality were courses where professors taught limited, single-approach methods research. Another significant issue involved the limited focus of the formal preparation process on the latter stages of a research project. In particular, we found limited support and preparation for data analysis and the writing phases of the dissertation.

* Third, the institutions can foster and support student peer groups. These dissertation writing and reading groups seemed to have impressive impact on all facets of a student’s research experience.

* Fourth, our respondents rarely described a neutral experience with their advisor. These relationships were critical in both positive and productive ways or negative and deforming ways. The diverse experiences of the respondents gives rise to an important question: Several of the authors of this study have backgrounds in teacher education and we wonder what formal preparation novice professors have in advising and what are the strategies for the ongoing professional development of faculty research advisors? If there are no professional development programs for advisors in place, we suggest that departments of education review the frameworks on cognitive apprenticeships that undergird many of our finest teacher preparation programs.

* Lastly, there’s more to becoming a qualitative researcher than just acquiring the lingo and a toolkit of methods. Almost all the respondents described the journey of becoming a researcher as being marked by a series of often-poignant emotional and cognitive milestones. Finding ways and providing forums for novice researchers to reflect on the emergence of a researcher-self and to monitor their subjectivity would probably help support doctoral students on the dissertation journey.

References

