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The EdD and one bedtime story more! An exploration of the Third-Space inhabited by mothers working in educational leadership whilst studying for a professional doctorate.

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Abstract

This article focuses on the ever-present pressures, tensions and opportunities for women leaders in education, and the link between identity, pursuit of excellence and the pursuit of a complete, worthwhile life. It highlights the experience of three women in educational leadership who are undertaking Doctoral studies while balancing the needs of family, work and study. It aims to explore how the multiple facets of a woman's identity come together to enable each to lead in an educational setting. We consider 'the third space in an identity', a place in which 'everything comes together' and we call into question whether a woman's identity as a leader is ever truly fixed. The implications of this narrative are that it may serve to inform and challenge those responsible running a Doctorate in Education (EdD) programme. We highlight the implications of leadership, including capabilities from a gendered perspective and the impact and challenges on us in navigating the twilight zone. We conclude that lifelong learning needs to meet the need of learners.

Keywords

Twilight zone, leadership, women, Doctorate in Education, capabilities

Introduction

This article brings together the experiences of three senior female educational leaders to provide an insight into the complexities of undertaking a professional doctorate, while working full-time and tackling the competing dynamics of being a mother and spouse. It discusses the context of the changes in thinking about leadership styles and considering using ideas around authentic leadership and capabilities to provide a framework for achieving goals. The challenges and the realities of the third space are discussed as is the hope that our narratives may help to shape future doctorate working and challenge some of the preconceived ideas which may exist surrounding professional doctorate students with regard to the opportunities or compulsions (Tight, 1998). We are writing, in part, to make sense of

and explain our identities within a doctorate, and why these need to be understood by those that lead the programmes if they are to be inclusive of those that operate in that twilight zone and to meet us in the third space. Writing, in itself, is an act of identity, where those who engage in it are partly aligning themselves with socio-culturally shaped subject positions but also to play their part in reproducing or challenging dominant practices and discourses, and the values, beliefs and interests which they embody (Ivanic, 1998).

Finding our identities

The concept surrounding identity, leadership and self are complex and open to interpretation, dependent upon how one views oneself, how others view one, and how identity changes over time, is portrayed in different situations and at different times (Tight, 1998). Schlenker (1985), for instance, defined identity as ‘a theory (schema) of an individual that describes, interrelates, and explains his or her relevant features, characteristics, and experiences’ (Schlenker, 1985: 68). However, Baumeister (1986) defined a person’s identity as a way of seeing self, a personal construction or interpretation of the self. In psychological terms, self and identity are reflexive concepts; in other words, self-identity is multidimensional (Klenke, 2007). We are looking at what identity means in a Doctorate in Education (EdD) context and will be putting forward the theory of authentic leadership as one we most identify with in experiencing an EdD programme, while also postulating that this version of leadership is one that those organizing and leading the programmes could utilize positively to support other female leaders in situations similar to ours. Avolio and Gardner (2005) identified four elements of self-awareness that they believe are specifically relevant to the development of authentic leadership: values, cognitions regarding identity, emotions, and motives/goals (Gardner et al., 2005). This version of leadership identity puts forward the view that the leader’s personal history (and key trigger events) serve as antecedents for authentic leadership (Klenke, 2007). Positive events will help trigger or enhance leadership development and a deep change in an individual’s self-identity. But equally negative events can also shape a person’s perspective of how ‘worthy they are’ as a leader, as a student and as a person, dependent upon how they are reflected upon and interpreted in terms of the self (Tight, 1998; Gardner et al., 2005). The issues of worth, self and identity are considered in each of the narratives below, and referred back to when considering how an EdD programme could be led with the suggestion being that those that lead there should also consider the role that authentic leadership could have in making the programme more accessible to all. Bush (2008) refers to a change in the field from educational administration to educational management to educational leadership and contend that the central concept of *leadership*, the focus of this project, is *influence* rather than authority, is *intentional*, and leadership is increasingly thought to be linked to terms like values, vision and mission (Morrison, 2009). Apple (2012) discussed the need for researchers and practitioners within Educational Leadership and Management to act in a variety of ways, the most relevant to this research project being: to bear witness to what is going on, to point to opportunities for action, and to work with other groups and make alliances.

Soja’s ‘Third Space Theory’ in the pursuit of a worthwhile life

The capabilities approach was designed as a means to provide a normative framework for the assessment of human development. The core focus is on what individuals are able to do and stresses the importance of evaluating capabilities and not outcomes alone. The normative principle behind the approach in education is that the ultimate aim of education is to expand people’s capabilities; that is, their freedom to promote or achieve valuable activities that are important to them (Nussbaum, 2011). The approach argues for well-being and quality of life,

the entitlement for all people to flourish, social justice, and that there is more to education than human capital and income generation, though it does acknowledge the latter's relevance. When used as an evaluative measure, a person's quality of life can be assessed in terms of the capability to achieve valuable functioning and whether learners are able to convert the resources that are available to them into capabilities, and thereafter potentially into functioning (Hedge and MacKenzie, 2012).

Building on the work of Bhabha (1994) and Soja (1996) draws on the sociolinguistic 'Third Space Theory' to help us recognize the third spaces we occupy; a place between home (the first space) and work (the second space), where we draw on our knowledge from both. The first and second spaces are different from each other, allowing for differing and sometimes conflicting behaviours, mannerisms and social interactions (Wilson, 2000). These first and second spaces in our lives work together to generate this third space, a 'dynamic, in-between space'; in which 'cultural translation' takes place (Bhabha, 1990); the epitome of this is realized during doctoral study, where students must draw on experience and academic knowledge from both home and work to produce a significant body of work. This postcolonial theory of identity and community is a useful way of reflecting upon the third space created during EdD study, a space which may not only be occupied on a short-lived basis, but can often be inhabited for several years (Lambeir, 2005). The third space can be a safe space in which to be creative and experiment (Whitchurch, 2010), unbound by the 'rules and resources' (Giddens, 1991) inherited from one or other space. However, the ambiguous nature of this third space can also mean a lack of organizational safety nets, and often a 'sense of struggle, challenge and tension' – 'the Dark Side' (Leitch, 2006; Whitchurch, 2010).

Alexander et al. (2014) described how meetings with supervisors, and other opportunities for professional recognition such as being invited to present at a conference, 'act as a kind of punctuation to the work of academic identity construction'. Studying for a research degree such as the EdD sees you having to juggle several roles and statuses: these primarily include developing academic practices as a doctoral candidate, the self-project of developing identity, and the workplace site of professional learning. By having these reinforced, be it through verbal encouragement, assignment feedback or the shared collegial journey of others on the programme, these roles become stronger and easier to manage.

Methodology

This qualitative paper draws upon the use of autobiographical narratives to give the reader an honest and real-life insight into Soja's 'third space' in action. Here, we present three 'stories' in ways that preserve their integrity, while also conveying a sense of the 'irreducible humanity' of the person (Etherington, 2007). Narrative analysis treats stories such as these as knowledge, which constitutes the 'social reality' of the narrative (Etherington, 2004: 81) and allows for a sense of the person's experience in its depth, messiness, richness and texture (Etherington, 2007). Using a social constructionist lens, we accept the narrators as being interdependent and embedded with their culture, context, language, experience and understandings, and value that knowledge in turn is constructed between people who actively engage in its development (Etherington, 2007). Autobiographical data consist of accounts about the communicant's own life (Bold, 2012: 11). The three participants in the research have each provided an autobiographical account from their own perspective, and these reflective accounts form the main data of this project (Bold, 2012: 11).

The data were collected through written response to a set of semi-structured interview questions created by one of the authors of this paper. Each of the three author participants – essentially meeting the desired sample criteria of being female, working in a leadership role

in schools and also being a student enrolled on an EdD programme – then submitted their narrative piece in response to these prompts, and through a shared ownership, the three narratives were analysed and explored for key themes and shared threads.

Our learning journeys

The following narratives are personal to each of the authors of this paper. All three of us are at different stages of a doctorate in education. As learners the commonality is that we are bound by similar personal circumstances as women which impact our learning and leadership in our schools (Spiro, 2015). Poppy and Rehana first met while studying for a Masters in Educational Leadership Management. Upon completion, both enrolled in Doctorates at different institutions and this is where Rehana and Suzie met. The group came together due to online forums to support educational leadership, management and development.

Poppy – written while Phase Leader at a Primary School

I remember my very first doctoral teaching session six years ago; the tutor read an extract from a piece of writing in which the female author reflected upon her dreams. As a class, we were asked if this constituted research data. I distinctly remember shaking my head. Dreams, I reflected, couldn't be deemed *reliable* or *valid* or *generalizable* – the buzzwords of research I had encountered in the past. But as my tutor encouraged discussion around the piece, I began to see how the details from the dream could still prove useful as data in the context of the article. Thinking back to that day I see how naïve I was; the horror of getting an answer wrong in class reverted me instantly to child-like embarrassment. Comfortingly, Wellington et al. (2005) state that we must recognize 'doubt and bewilderment' as 'creative spaces' (Wellington et al., 2005: 40) and should embrace the 'discomfort' of new understanding. So why, as a busy mother and overworked teacher, do I commit to more study, more hours at a laptop or book, fewer hours to devote to the husband and children? Because it's *my* dream. For me, it came down to intrinsic interest, an inner urge for personal development (Leonard et al., 2005) with the aim of career enhancement, and possibly a slight sprinkling of narcissism. Even whilst in the throes of doctoral study, we are all constructing our own academic identity and, as Alexander et al. (2014) highlight, it is through critical self-reflection that we can learn more about ourselves.

James (1971; Perry, 1948) believed the 'self' to be a social product, existing as an effect of caring about what different groups of people think. As we each interact with different social groups, each person possesses/plays multiple selves or 'roles'. There are as many different selves as there are different positions that a person holds in society; 'the self reflects society' (Stryker and Burke, 2000).

So who am I? A mother of two young boys, a wife, a teacher. A woman. All of my roles are still growing and changing – after all, identities are fluid and 'evoked and shaped in actions and social exchange' (Alexander et al., 2014: 4) which happen on a daily basis. Started a year after the birth of my first son, the EdD has come to feel like an extra part of the family. Just like a child, it needs attention and time in order to thrive. The only difference is I'm parenting this one alone.

Most comfortable discussing my studies when at my monthly Saturday EdD workshops, in my 'third space', I feel confident, empowered and deserved of my place on the course, surrounded by others with the same passion for knowledge, who can also empathize with my struggles and concerns that I am never reading enough.

But at school, in the staffroom? The abbreviation 'EdD' is not uttered. Unless during my appraisal with the Senior Leadership Team, or a job interview, I have not spoken of the doctorate inside a school building. Not wanting to seem arrogant, or perhaps still not feeling experienced or worthy enough of the role when talking to other more experienced staff

members? I'm not sure. When needs must, I have sometimes referred to my 'PhD', feeling instant shame at having to misname my academic baby in order to try to help others comprehend.

Doctoral study has 'numerous challenges' (Cotterall, 2013: 174) but for me the hardest initial one to overcome was the feeling that I even deserved to embark on such study. Self-criticism and doubt delayed my application to the course for several months. The problem with roles is that naming roles invokes expectations with regard to each other's and one's own behaviours (McCall and Simmons, 1978; Stryker, 1980). My ideal of those who had completed doctorates did not align with my self-concept of a young girl at the start of her teaching career.

I have experienced 'pain and unexpectedness' of personal and professional learning (Leitch, 2006: 2) as a result of the EdD. I have felt loneliness, confusion, isolation in the depths of article reading, and yet also enjoyed the highs of passing assignments and delivering presentations met with applause. My third space of academic study has contributed positively to my self-esteem, well being and self-actualization. My values, life outlook and perspective have all changed over the years and my studies play a large part in this; my ultimate academic goal now is to make this dream a reality.

It was this isolation that led to the bond between Poppy and Rehana. In the same situation they ended up talking and supporting each other in their learning and life through online interaction in a virtual shared space (Gibson, 2013). On different Doctorate programmes, though never having met face to face, they have been able to motivate each other to continue on through the twilight zone.

Rehana – Headteacher of a Primary School

Education is precious, life affirming and valuable. I did not realize this growing up! I believed it was important to be educated but expected that my role would primarily be a homemaker. I have ended up a Headteacher by a series of what could be considered chances. So why have I undertaken a professional doctorate? My journey started with trying to be a good teacher. I did not have a plan with regard to leadership progression. Initially I began reading to meet the needs of my learners; this led to enhancing my pedagogy but not critical reflection. I was not aware that I was starting on my journey of leadership and learning. As a literature graduate I have always found comfort in books; allowing myself to romanticize events or try new things based on the identities and concepts that I was reading about. I have always been challenged with learning. My thoughts can feel chaotic and I like to structure my learning; this allows me to take risks, which I would not have been confidently able to do without such knowledge. I never imagined I would progress beyond class teacher. However, I was singled out for good practice in teaching and learning during an Inspection and was promoted. It was the first time I had been noticed and I was flattered. I did not want to let down the people who had put their trust in me. I was promoted to Deputy Headteacher at 27. Following that appointment, I worked for a Headteacher who had completed a PhD and he was a good role model who suggested that I should aspire to do the same. He encouraged me to attend events, including the BELMAS conference, where I met PhD students and other academic role models. This meeting opened up for me the real understanding of the value of education and how important it was. I am ashamed that I was a teacher in my thirties and I had not really understood until this point how privileged I was to have an education. It was after this that I committed to doing a Masters in Leadership with the ultimate view of undertaking an EdD. If I was to lead learning, I felt that I had to have followed the whole journey myself to understand what it is like to be a learner but also to really understand how to lead and enable change.

The influence that academic study has had on my identity has been profound. I believed I was not affected by life histories or feminism and felt that my generation has equity in the workplace, but the more I read, the more I understand that not all views are the same or people are treated equally. I feel that my EdD has isolated me from everyone, including my family and tutors. It seems a selfish pursuit and not worthwhile as the only person who actually values it is me. In contrast, when I notice its impact in my workplace, the informed risks I take and the calmness it brings me when managing change I realize the impact of my studies. I am a Headteacher of a successful school where everyone leads something. My EdD has taught me to really think about matters from a wider perspective. I use my heart as well as my head in decision making. I hope that undertaking my EdD will allow me to help others to understand the pursuit of a worthwhile life and the value that their education holds.

In the pursuit of a worthwhile life, social media has become a support for Rehana. The institution at which Rehana studies set up online forums for doctoral students, which both Suzie and Rehana joined. Originally, in the same cohort of a doctorate their journeys took different paths due to personal obligations. Fulfilling these personal obligations while trying to navigate a doctorate brought them closer together again to help motivate through the isolation of the third space. They helped make sense of the challenges and both have remained in the programme.

Suzie – Deputy Head of a Secondary School

I was in a mountain hut, high up in the Austrian Alps, living my ‘other’ life, pursuing a different identity, when I received a call. I had a place on the EdD programme starting that autumn. I was exhilarated and scared. I had worked my way up through my undergraduate, postgraduate, masters, each time wondering if I was good enough; was I clever enough? I was not interested in doing it for career progression but because I wanted to be the best I could be alongside the thirst for knowledge, the desire for personal development (Leonard et al., 2005). In my pursuit of what I perceived as a complete, worthwhile life, I had not given much thought to how it might influence my identity.

Markus and Nurius (1986) posited that we have an array of possible selves such as an ideal self (how we would like to be), an ‘ought’ self (how we think we should be) and the actual self. These possible selves are future-oriented schemata of what we think we could potentially become. For me, the working towards an EdD is part of the *ideal self*. The self that is successful in all the chosen identities that moves effortlessly between them, while being a competent education researcher and reflective practitioner. The EdD programme, with the varied nature of modules, focused on critical reflection and exposure to key thinkers, ethics, policy and future orientations, gave me scope to try out a variety of possible ‘selves’ and the identity I would like to have, feel I ought to have and what I would choose to become. The normative principle behind the approach in education is that the ultimate aim of education is to expand people’s capabilities. That is, their freedom to promote or achieve valuable activities that are important to them (Nussbaum, 2011). For me this has been the *ought self*, the one that lives a valuable life according to the standards that I grew up with and are promoted within the western culture today. But that has also led to a potential clash when applied to the workplace, *my actual self*. In the workplace I am one of five school leaders – four women, one man – and I don’t mention my EdD for fear it looks like I’m blowing my own trumpet, or suggesting I might know more than someone else – an issue of social identity. The social identity theory of leadership (Hogg, 2001; Hogg and van Knippenberg, 2003) is one that views leadership as a group process generated by social categorization and prototype-based depersonalization processes associated with social identity. Group identification, as self-categorization, invests the most prototypical member with the

appearance of having influence (Hogg, 2001; Hogg and van Knippenberg, 2003: 1). I don't want to be perceived as different or invite a potential culture clash by advertising my part in the programme as that would immediately make me 'different' and could, potentially, lead to divisions between those I look to lead on a day to day basis. This has implications for realizing capability as it means that my *actual self* is the one I am choosing to be, perhaps for a more straightforward life than the *ideal self* that I would like to attain.

Since starting the programme I've added a few more identities and shed some others. As Lord and Brown (2004) describe it, both negative and positive moments and events can trigger a deep change in an individual's self-identity, bringing into clearer focus alternative possible selves that eventually may replace the individual's actual self. The mountain leader is still there but I'm now a school leader, a wife and mother to two small children. I've moved continents and have shed the identity of being a diplomatic spouse, but also the one where my pursuits are about my own life, needs and wants. In pursuing a complete, worthwhile life, as my identity has changed, the balance of capabilities has become more even. The EdD has provided me with increased opportunities for economic participation, it has enhanced my professional standing to a greater or lesser degree (depending on circumstances), contributed to my self-esteem and well being, and it has ensured I remain aware of my limitations, making me more realistic and less spontaneous. The twilight zone, for me, is just that. The short twilight of a winter evening where I can dare to dream of this flourishing life, to be the academic, the researcher, the competent school leader, before the realization hits that it is such a short space of time before I need to assume another identity. Usually by stepping on a piece of Lego.

Thematic analysis – implication for programme design and management

Our relationship blossomed in the third space using digital tools and forums that allowed us to carry out the work for this paper. We discussed papers and personal readings, we then highlighted and organized who would be doing what and then set to task. Most of the analysis was done together online using digital tools to support our work as it evolved. We all discussed our personal learning and interest areas, which had already been shaped by the taught sections of our own doctorate programmes.

Three very different women, with very different backgrounds, holding very different leadership posts in very different educational institutions, all seem to share intriguingly similar feelings and concerns when it comes to the EdD. If we look at how individuals come to be effective leaders, there is no cut and dry answer; notably, the field of educational leadership is continually developing (Gunter, 2001), but additionally the way in which leaders in education develop and operate is heavily influenced by contextual and situational matters.

According to Senge (1996):

'We are coming to believe that leaders are those people who "walk ahead", people who are genuinely committed to deep change in themselves and their organisations. They lead through developing new skills, capabilities, and understandings' (Senge, 1996: 3).

Despite the three authors of this paper being very different, perhaps the one desire they all share is the intrinsic desire to continue to develop and change, despite the often discomfort (Leitch, 2006) and risk involved. So how can the academic changes be most successfully managed and considered by programme leads of EdD programmes?

Regarding adult learners' needs, and EdD students as 'reflective practitioners', particularly the ideas of Kolb (1984) and Schon (1983), who emphasized the importance of experience and reflection in professional learning, Kolb defines experiential learning as 'a process whereby knowledge is transformed through the transformation of experience' (Kolb, 1984).

A professional doctorate such as the EdD must allow for an active approach, where learners can construct meanings and interpretations relevant to their particular contexts, by reflecting on ideas in relation to their own experiences. The use of reflection as a vehicle for learning is particularly important for professionals, since much of their work is unpredictable and non-routine, so building up expertise is an ongoing process (Schon, 1983).

Horner (1997) introduced the link between leadership and motivation; since educational leaders are concerned with influencing the behaviour of others, they must consider how others can be persuaded to submit to that influence, also explaining that effective leadership involves creating leadership capacity in colleagues, a notion sometimes referred to as 'empowerment'. Bennett (2003) explores the relationship between structure, culture and power in organizations, arguing that leadership and management are dependent on power exchanges and relationships which affect the commitment of the 'followers'.

Knowledge management is an area that is receiving increasing research in the area of educational leadership and management. Particularly relevant here in higher education, where the main goal of undergoing a doctorate is knowledge sharing, knowledge management focuses particularly on professional knowledge and understanding, which is such a large part of distributed leadership and professional learning in educational institutions. Rowley (1999) also explores the concept of knowledge management, with educational institutions being 'knowledge based organisations' (Rowley, 1999) who must 'identify, create and evolve their knowledge assets' (Rowley, 1999) in order to adapt and change their programmes over time in order to fit the changing face of study in our society, particularly over the last decade with regard to distance learning and e-resources.

The three honest narratives shared in this article highlight the importance of emotions in making challenging decisions, and how the 'emotional work' and 'emotional labour' (Ginsberg and Davies, 2007; Hochschild, 2012) can place great strain on individuals' emotional resources and resilience. Interestingly, only one of the authors of this paper speaks about her doctorate outside of her institution of study.

We have sought to demonstrate the importance of emotions in making challenging decisions, and how emotions in all spaces of our lives can make it difficult to take the action which rational argument dictates. We have also stressed that sometimes our values do not give us a clear sense of what we ought to do, and we have to resolve the dilemmas that are created when this occurs. We must reflect on ideas and issues in relation to our own professional circumstances; leadership and management development is not simply about learning techniques, but requires us to build our development of what can be called technical skills on a clear understanding of what we believe to be good leadership and management. This requires careful attention to reflection on our own value systems, on those of our colleagues at schools and trusts in which we work – even on those of our tutors and EdD programme leads – and on the ways in which we are supported and challenged by those values in our daily work.

Conclusions: implications for management and leadership

Undertaking an EdD requires the participant to be both robust and determined. The conditions and the individual reasons for undertaking an EdD are multifaceted but in each of the narratives there is a need for the EdD to shape our own identities, in our worlds which are busy and demanding in their own rights. This can be misinterpreted, it can be viewed externally that the students are participating for job requirements, career progression or ambition but in reality it is about the candidate's own journey and shaping of their identity

and confidence (Tight, 1998). A further reality is that the authors involved are all self-funded students as well as working mothers of multiple young children, which means they are time and finance poor.

The EdD offers us an escape to think and a space to explore new concepts. It helps to ground us into our realities by having something which is indeed a selfish pursuit. The EdD course could be more flexible in its construction to allow wider participation, which could make the course more manageable and enjoyable. This would maintain an existence for doctorate students that is without the guilt of being a poor student, wife or leader. Lifelong learning development of doctoral programmes needs to reflect regularly on the individual motivations of the candidates to be more than career enhancing economics and be mindful that the main pursuit could be just to be a learner. For this to be a reality the programmes must allow creativity and flexibility to allow participants to flourish in their own environments as well as lead in schools. It is also important to recognize the importance of social digital networks to support learners and that the value of human interaction and comradeship can never be undervalued as a tool to keep people engaged in hard to reach places such as the twilight zone and the third space. Further, that lifelong learning is exactly that and for professional doctorates to be successful they must be flexible enough to support individual learning journeys.

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After over a decade of teaching and managing in a wide variety of primary schools throughout London, **Poppy Gibson** is now embarking on an exciting new career as a Lecturer in Primary Education at the University of Greenwich. She lives in Hertfordshire with her husband, two children, tortoise, dog and parrot. Poppy is in the sixth year of her Doctorate in Education at Oxford Brookes University; her thesis explores the impact of social media and online communication on young girls' identity formations.

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