

Overcoming Personal Challenges That Have Impacted My Academic Journey: A Narrative

Lisa Weber

Ph.D. Student

Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland

lisa.weber@mun.ca

I come from humble beginnings, and as a result, I have had challenges and obstacles that many people do not face until later in academic life or perhaps not at all. Growing up I had several factors that the literature has identified as significantly contributing to a student's decision to drop out of school. For example, my father has a Grade 10 education and my mother completed her high school credits as an adult learner (Orfield, 2006), and I come from a low-income family (Laird, DeBell, Kienzl, & Chapman, 2007). In particular to higher dropout rates among girls, my parents displayed preferential treatment of my brother (Leung & Zhang, 2008), and I frequently took on greater responsibilities at home with the household management (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Ersado, 2005; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). However, instead of allowing these factors to deter me from my academic goals, they contributed in a positive manner by instilling in me perseverance, resiliency, and determination to realize my educational goals.

When I Decided to Attend University

From a very young age, I have always wanted to become a teacher. When I was in elementary school, I wanted to be able to write on the blackboard and 'boss' other people around. Once in high school my motives became more altruistic – I sincerely wanted to help students who found it a challenge to achieve success in school. While in high school I encountered a series of events that had a negative impact on my life. At the age of 15 I moved out on my own, at age 16 I almost failed all my Grade 11 courses, and at age 17 I became friends with the wrong people. As a result of these events, I was losing my focus, my confidence, and my purpose.

While attending high school, June Pollard, my attendance secretary, kept sending detention slips to my homeroom because my Chemistry teacher kept marking me absent, although I had officially and gladly dropped the course. Day after day I would go down to the main office in order to rectify the situation. At first I considered this an inexcusable inconvenience, and, while I made my displeasure very apparent to her, June was always kind and smiled a genuine smile when she saw me. After a couple of weeks I began to anticipate the detention slips because she was one of the few staff members at the school who displayed patience and understanding towards me, even when I was not always considerate towards her. She eventually transferred to a different high school (and my Chemistry teacher eventually stopped marking me absent), so we would only see each other when she came into where I worked part-time after school. During these brief interactions, June would frequently encourage me to follow my dream of becoming a teacher. I doubted my capabilities, and myself, but she never did. In my last year of high school I decided to apply to three universities and I requested a reference letter from her for my application packages. She agreed, and one night soon afterwards she arrived at work to show me

the rough draft of her letter. I felt foolish crying in the middle of K-Mart, but I was genuinely surprised and touched that someone who only knew me casually could see past my hurt and anger and describe so many positive qualities about me. Needless to say, I was accepted into all three universities, and this is how my life as an academic began. Her interactions with me clearly demonstrate the findings of Fall and Roberts (2012), who concluded that teacher support can have a positive influence on a student's self-perceptions.

When I Decided to Pursue a Ph.D. Program in Education

Since moving to Newfoundland in 2008, I have had a difficult time trying to secure a permanent position with the Newfoundland and Labrador English School District. The number of substitute teaching days I worked was inconsistent from week to week and tutoring students was beginning to become tiresome. Over the years I've worked a number of part-time jobs in order to ensure I maintained a steady income to cover my monthly expenses, but I did not find any of these solutions personally or professionally satisfactory. So after taking a three-year break upon completing my Master's of Education thesis at Memorial, I decided to apply to the Ph.D. program and to teaching positions outside the province. I decided to base my decision on the outcome of my applications. I received my acceptance letter, so I am here in Newfoundland for another few years for a Ph.D. in Education.

While I have only completed eight months of my Ph.D. program thus far, I have already faced several obstacles and challenges specific to transitioning to life as an academic. My first significant obstacle was my difficulty in obtaining a second reference letter for my application process. Since I had graduated from the M. Ed. program three years earlier, I found it difficult to secure a recent academic reference. I contacted my current supervisor, and asked him what I should do, and without hesitation, he wrote me a recommendation letter based on our few brief meetings and the samples of writing I had shown him. I am very grateful that he made this decision and I believe that his support early on in my doctoral journey had an impact on my acceptance into the program.

My Journey as a Doctoral Student

Within days of trying to acclimatize myself to academia once again, I was strongly encouraged by my doctoral committee to compose and submit a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funding application, a difficult task for even the most experienced faculty. While meeting the reading and writing requirements of my graduate courses, I also spent a significant amount of time reading as many journal articles as I could and composing several drafts of my application for feedback and editing. I was becoming frustrated with the process because I felt unfamiliar with the content of my research topic, unsure of the methodology, and inarticulate about what I needed to convey in my application. I attended the SSHRC writing workshop, read successful applications, and asked for advice and feedback from faculty members, yet I did not feel confident that it was meeting the requisite standard. Discouraged, I sent an email to all my committee members a couple days before the deadline thanking them for their support and input, but I had decided not to submit an application at this time. My mind was made up; I would re-apply next year.

One of my committee members replied to my email with a very supportive and encouraging email. He acknowledged that it is a difficult process and that I probably would not have my application accepted, but I shouldn't discount all the learning opportunities this application process brings with it. He commented on the progress of my various drafts and how I should not give up because I was very close to completing the application process. Because of this, I reconsidered and decided to submit a completed SSHRC application. While I was not successful in this endeavour, my committee member's kind words helped provide me with the inspiration I needed to persevere with this challenging and daunting task, while helping me stay focussed on the process, which is ultimately more important most times than the production of the final outcome.

As part of my journey as a first year doctoral student, I was required to present a doctoral seminar. I decided to present my doctoral research because I wanted to receive feedback from those who attended and to practice my ability to answer difficult or unexpected questions regarding my research. I required guidance and feedback regarding the content and direction of my research framework and methodology and I was worried that without guidance, the philosophical content of my research would be underrepresented or unclear.

Another one of my committee members willingly set aside the time to provide me with written feedback on my PowerPoint slides and to hear me practice my presentation. She helped me streamline my presentation, to articulate aspects of my study that needed to be included in the presentation, and to feel confident enough to present the early stages of my doctoral research to faculty members. Even though she confessed that she is unfamiliar with John Dewey's philosophical premises and assertions and how they relate to education, her insightful questions helped to draw out the points I wanted to raise during my seminar. As a result, I received positive feedback from those who attended my seminar and I am more confident about preparing for my next presentation.

Conclusion

As a doctoral student, I still face several challenges and obstacles, including developing an understanding of the university structure, adopting the culture and language of academia, establishing a balance between my personal and academic life, and developing a more definite understanding of my roles and responsibilities within academia (Crane, O'Hern, & Lawler 2009; Fogg, 2002; LaRocco &

Bruns 2006). In addition, in alignment with the research literature, the transition from my career as a special education teacher to a career in academia can result in feelings of isolation and loneliness (Crane et al., 2009). I know that there will always be challenges and obstacles that will impede my progress as an academic, but from my personal experiences, I have learned that when someone cares about the progress you are making and puts forth an effort to support you in your journey, there are very few obstacles that cannot be overcome, and as a result, the support that teachers can provide can improve a student's feelings of academic efficacy and ability to master goals (Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007; Ryan & Patrick, 2001).

References

- Cairns, R. B., Cairns, B. D., & Neckerman, H. J. (1989). Early school dropout: configurations and determinants. *Child Development, 60*, 1437–1452.
- Crane, B., O'Hern, B., & Lawler, P. (2009). Second career professionals: Transitioning to a faculty role. *Journal of Faculty Development, 23*(1), 24–29.
- Ersado, L. (2005). Child labor and schooling decisions in urban and rural areas: Comparative evidence from Nepal, Peru, and Zimbabwe. *World Development, 33*(3), 455–480.
- Fall, A., & Roberts, G. (2012). High school dropouts: Interactions between social context, self-perceptions, school engagement, and student dropout. *Journal of Adolescence, 35*, 787–798. doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2011.11.004
- Fogg, P. (2002). Moving to a different world: What happens when politicians and business leaders become professors. *Chronicle of Higher Education, 48*(26), A10–A12.
- Gleason, P., & Dynarski, M. (2002). Do we know whom to serve? Issues in using risk factors to identify dropouts. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 7*(1), 25–41.
- Laird, J., DeBell, M., Kienzl, G., & Chapman, C. (2007). *Dropout rates in the United States: 2005* (NCES 2007-059). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
- LaRocco, D. J., & Bruns, D. A. (2006). Practitioner to professor: An examination of second career academics' entry into academia. *Education, 126*(4), 662–639.
- Leung, M. C. M., & Zhang, J. (2008). Gender preference, biased sex ratio, and parental investments in children in single-child households. *Review of Economics of the Household, 6*(2), 91–110.
- Orfield, G. (2006). Losing our future: minority youth left out. In G. Orfield (Ed.), *Dropouts in America: Confronting the graduation rate crisis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Educational Press.
- Patrick, H., Ryan, A., & Kaplan, A. (2007). Early adolescents' perceptions of the classroom social environment, motivational beliefs, and engagement. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 99*, 83–98.
- Ryan, A. M., & Patrick, H. (2001). The classroom social environment and changes in adolescents' motivation and engagement during middle school. *American Educational Research Journal, 38*, 437–460.
- Shahidul, S. M., & Zehadul Karim, A. H. M. (2015). Factors contributing to school dropout among the girls: A review of the literature. *European Journal of Research and Reflection in Educational Sciences, 3*(2), 25-36.