

On becoming a researcher: a kaleidoscope of life

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Abstract

I believe the journey to becoming a researcher is quite complex as it is intricately connected with the other roles in my life. In the following narrative I have chosen to use kaleidoscope imagery to represent the interconnected yet constantly changing aspects of my life on this journey. While the kaleidoscope image, when illuminated, displays a beautiful symmetrical pattern of colors and shapes, there is usually a hue or a dominating color which is the backdrop for the design. While my kaleidoscope has many colors I have chosen to reflect on several of the more dominating colors to highlight aspects of my journey.

Introduction

When I think about what it means to become a researcher I feel a sense of anxiety begin to surface. My thoughts scatter in so many different directions as I quickly realize that the concept is quite complex. Becoming a researcher has so many layers of meaning and assumptions that I struggle to articulate the experience.

Describing the process of “becoming a researcher” is much like trying to capture the design within a kaleidoscope. The Merriam–Webster online dictionary defines a kaleidoscope as:

An instrument containing loose bits of colored material (as glass or plastic) between two flat plates and two plane mirrors so placed that changes of position of the bits of material are reflected in an endless variety of patterns [def 1].

The image in the kaleidoscope is made up of many colors and materials which blend together and constantly shift or change with movement. The mesmerizing pattern of colors creates a beautiful mosaic pattern yet with the smallest of movements the entire arrangement changes. Much like trying to capture this elusive image in the kaleidoscope, becoming a researcher also seems intangible at times. As I travel on this journey I will not pretend I fully grasp what it is I am chasing only that it is something that seems to be inevitably intertwined with the colors of my life and creates an ever changing lens from which I view the world. Just as Richardson (2001) contends that her ideas about writing are not stagnant but shift and change with her personal and political life so too does my journey. The colors of my kaleidoscope are intertwined yet when illuminated there is a hue or a backdrop of color which often dominates and upon which the other colors and patterns dance. These colors shift and change with the emotions that are attached to my intrapersonal, personal and professional life. While the colors of my kaleidoscope remain the same I struggle to keep the colors from shifting. This balancing act seems very hard to achieve. As I work through my sixth year at this institution of higher education I often reflect on my struggles and growth on this colorful journey to becoming a researcher... a journey which I feel I am still in the early stages of exploration.

The pieces of my life are interconnected and move around and influence or alter the colors in my kaleidoscope. Richardson (2001) claims “no writing is untainted by human hands” (p. 34). In fact, it is this human factor which has had a significant influence on my research. The colors of my kaleidoscope are derived from my inner self, my family, my friends, my work, where I live, and my interests and passions and the influences of all of these factors on who I am. I will discuss some of the hues or dominating colors of my kaleidoscope below.

Green as a backdrop/hue represents perseverance

I chose the color green to represent “perseverance” in my kaleidoscope because green universally represents ‘go’. In embarking on this journey to becoming a researcher tremendous dedication and perseverance was needed. The ABD (all but dissertation) phenomenon is proof of the prerequisite dedication and perseverance needed to complete this journey. Richardson (2001) emphasizes the influence of “specific, local and historical contexts” (p. 35) when writing. For me, this color in my journey is linked to my history. It is rooted in the values engrained in me as a child. My parents worked hard all their lives to provide a good life for their six children and instilled in them the value of hard work. This work ethic and internal motivation has remained with me throughout my life and has propelled me forward in many aspects of my life but particularly on my education journey. My friends were also an important influence on me as we supported one another through good and difficult times. During my first year of university I enrolled in various courses and became very interested in the field of psychology. As I think back on those early days it was definitely the influence of my first year professor as well as the subject matter which attracted me to the field. My first year psychology professor was engaging and related well to his students. With first year classes so large it was refreshing to feel connected to the subject matter. As I studied more psychology I became very interested in child and adolescent development and so pursued an undergraduate degree in psychology. With my bachelor of science degree “in hand” I began to plan my next step of my journey. I knew I enjoyed working with children and actively sought out both paid and volunteer work to gain a better understanding of how I might connect my interests with work. With reflection and experience to inform me I decided I wanted to pursue a master’s degree in educational psychology. Still focused on child development my interests narrowed and I pursued a thesis in reading development and children’s knowledge of the causes of reading difficulties. I wanted to better understand how their knowledge and perceptions may impact their view of themselves and others. While I did not fully understand the value of completing research at the time it proved to be very important when applying for registration as a psychologist and later when considering doctoral studies. My degree allowed me the privilege of working as a school counselor where I was able to support students, their families, teachers and the surrounding school area for over twenty years. I worked in small communities as well as urban centers and continued to hone my skills. While I continued to attend workshops, conferences and other venues of professional development, my desire to help students and to better understand their needs created a yearning in me to return to school and to further my education, a need to refine my skills, to seek answers to my probing questions that went un-answered and the need to make a difference. One of those unanswered questions became the focus of my doctoral dissertation. I wanted to learn more about second language learning and predictors of success in second language learning as I was bombarded by parents in the school system struggling with making decisions about French immersion for their children.

My need to seek more education and to better understand second language learning also highlighted my ability to persevere as my husband and I made the difficult decision to complete our doctorates in opposite ends of the country. My husband was accepted into a doctoral program in western Canada while I was accepted into a program in Toronto. We were excited and anxious as we began this new adventure. As a young married couple the time apart in some ways would be a test of the strength of our relationship. I recall my husband's mother not understanding why we were going to two different universities and wondering if it was a "trial" separation. There was also anxiety around entering a doctoral program. Was I doctoral material? Was I in over my head? Seeds of doubt began germinate in my psyche ... What was I doing? What were *we* doing? Yet, it was also an exciting time in our lives as we rented out our house, left the everyday life responsibilities behind us and embraced the challenges that lay ahead of us. We were excited about exploring new cities, meeting new people, learning and being challenged in our thinking and being exposed to other ways of knowing! It was exhilarating. We kept in close contact by phone and handwritten letters as internet technology was limited at the time. We worked long hard hours while we were apart and planned for our next time together.

While the year apart was difficult for us as a couple, the challenge of trying to complete my research upon my return home proved to be an even greater hurdle. At this stage in my journey the colors of my kaleidoscope shifted and while perseverance was still dominating the surrounding colors blended and changed as our lives evolved. Our return home was quickly followed by the death of both of my husband's parents, the diagnosis of my father with cancer and the birth of three beautiful children. I have always believed that as one door closes another opens and this belief came to fruition as my husband visited me on the maternity ward of the hospital getting ready to give birth and then traveled to the floor below to visit his mother who was quite ill and then on to another hospital to visit his father who was in the final stages of life. For the next number of years our lives focused on building a family, taking care of elderly parents, full time work and finishing our doctorates. We went to bed exhausted, and woke up exhausted as our sleep was usually interrupted by the needs of our little ones. There were many days when we questioned if it was worth it and many days when it would have been so easy to relieve some of the pressure by taking the doctoral studies off our overflowing plates. The kaleidoscope constantly shifted and changed during this period of my life as our focus changed. This was a difficult road for us, one in which pure determination and perhaps stubbornness allowed our journey to continue.

Shortly after the birth of our third child I finally completed my doctoral studies and returned to the school system. My job was very satisfying and I applied the knowledge I had gained in my studies to practice whenever I could but wondered if I could do something different. My doctoral studies changed the lens from which I viewed my world. I now saw the role of research in my work and felt the need to seek answers to some of the questions posed in my everyday contact with others. I wanted to be able to help parents make decisions about their children's programming based on research. The research was not available and I felt I could change this.

Crimson as a backdrop/hue represents sacrifice and love

My kaleidoscope began to shift and change again as the competing themes of sacrifice and love began to form the backdrop during this stage of my journey. While I derived great satisfaction from my work as a school counselor I began to wonder if I might enjoy working at a post

secondary level more. I felt this would allow me the opportunity to do research on some of those un-answered questions related to my work and at the same time be able to share my experiences over the past twenty or more years with others so that they may better understand the challenges and rewards of a school counselor. A position became available in the Counseling Psychology department in the Faculty of Education and I was offered the job. The learning curve for moving from practice to academia was steeper than I had anticipated. My new job required many additional hours as I tried to establish a research agenda and gain some mastery over my teaching. At the same time my young children also required a considerable amount of attention. I was torn between my desire to succeed in the academic world and the visceral aching to be with my children. I loved my husband and my children fiercely and felt that I was a mother and partner first and foremost and their needs should come first. Yet I did not want to give up on being an academic. Maybe it was the ‘hope’ in me, the hope that things would get better or maybe it was the “fight” in me, that drive to persevere, to not give up? Maybe it was both? I am not sure why but I found it hard to let go of the academic journey I had begun. The colors of my kaleidoscope bleed or blend together at times, losing focus. I struggled to find work-life balance as my work kept invading my home time leaving me feeling like I was being stretched too thin in too many different directions. Guilt weighed heavily on my mind as I listened to my children begging me to go back to my ‘old job’. With more regular hours in my old job, family time was safe-guarded and I did not have to relinquish holiday time in order to meet deadlines. Now in this job, there were nights when I sat around the kitchen table trying to help my older children with their homework only to have my youngest child clinging to my leg crying for attention while in the back of my mind I kept wondering how I was going to find the energy to do my own work when they went to bed. Exhausted, I seriously questioned if this journey of becoming a researcher was really worth it. What price had to be paid? Was it that important to me? The only thread that kept me holding on was the hope that it would get easier with time, and that things would settle and some semblance of normalcy would return. The dominant color in my kaleidoscope was a vibrant crimson representing sacrifice and bleeding hearts. The challenge of women trying to balance a career and a family is well documented with researchers such as Acker and Armenti (2004) and others (e.g., Drago et al., 2006; Raddon, 2002) reporting on the daily dilemma women in academia face as they struggle to manage their career and their families. In fact, Armenti (2004) reports the difficulty of maintaining a balance is one of the main reasons why women leave academia.

Grey as a backdrop/hue represents self-doubt

As the reflections of color bounced around in my kaleidoscope I could catch glimpses of grey invading the other colors. Grey represents the feeling of self-doubt that always hung on the periphery of my other colors, casting shadows and dulling the hues at times. Doubt has always plagued my life from when I was a very young child into adulthood. I recall thinking that I was accepted into my master’s program “out of some equity requirement” and had I not also been accepted at another university that feeling would have plagued me for a long time. I read about “imposter syndrome” which is characterized by self-doubt and uncertainty a number of years later and could relate to it. Reybold and Alamia (2008) report that “imposter syndrome”, while not openly discussed, is not uncommon among early career faculty. While I experienced doubt, my inner drive continued to propel me forward. It was this drive that challenged me to reach beyond my comfort zone again. As I entered academia my feelings of doubt were sometimes overwhelming. I had moved from practice where I felt comfortable and competent to academia

where I felt incompetent and always lacking. Coming from practice and not another academic setting provided a number of challenges. I was a counselor, not a teacher or a researcher so how was I supposed to do this job? For the first time in my life I was in a three-year tenure track position where I was required to prove myself and then further prove myself over another three-year period or risk not having my contract renewed. I had to demonstrate to the university community that I was worthy of this position through yearly review of my progress. This fear of failure and anxiety surrounding evaluation while not uncommon among new researchers (see Acker and Armenti, 2004) fueled my self-doubt and created an atmosphere of enormous pressure in which I felt compelled to perform. My uncertainty in my ability to succeed in this role caused me to request a leave of absence from my position in the school system instead of resigning so that at least I still had my position in the school system should I “fail” or decide I did not want to stay.

For the next six years I worked diligently to build my research, teaching, and service portfolios. I began first by tackling my teaching portfolio. I reflected often on my ability to teach... How do I do this? Can I do it well? Will students learn from my courses? Am I doing things the way they are supposed to be done? I enlisted all the help I could find to support me in gaining mastery of teaching. This included, among other things, attending professional development sessions related to teaching and exposing my vulnerability by approaching colleagues and discussing my teaching with them.

Second, I tackled my scholarship. It had been almost ten years since I was immersed full time in research and now I was being asked to “research”. Self-doubt plagued me as I struggled to find some footing, something to hold onto. How do I begin this process? Where do I begin? Can I do this? I worked persistently and sought out support wherever I could to move forward. Each step of this process proved to be humbling as I realized how much I had to learn. Self-doubt crept into my writing often causing blocks, it slivered into my publication submissions as I hesitated to let others see my work and it silently infected my sense of worth as a writer. Over time I have managed to harness this “monster” which has cast grey shadows over the colors of my kaleidoscope. While I have been able to push back the grey so that it does not dominate it still floats around the periphery of my kaleidoscope today.

Yellow as a hue/backdrop represents support

My kaleidoscope always seems to have touches of yellow intertwined with the other colors of the pattern. Yellow represent the various forms of support that have been present in my life. I believe I would have never ventured down this road of becoming a researcher if I had not had support. From a young age there have been key people in my life who have helped me along my journey. It may seem strange to think about this journey beginning so early but I believe that being a researcher does not occur overnight or when you enter academia. The foundation for that road is built well in advance. That sense of curiosity, that determination is instilled and nurtured from birth. My parents were the first to help me on that journey as they provided the love, support and when the time came, the wings I needed to grow. There were other key people who nurtured those traits throughout my life and believed in me: teachers, professors, friends, colleagues, and loved ones. My husband was my biggest supporter, my strength, particularly as I contemplated enrolling in and then completing doctoral studies. He believed in me and that faith never wavered through our struggles during those tough years. He helped me to believe in myself

when I had nothing left to give. He was there to lend a strong shoulder to lean on or an ear to listen, to review papers, to discuss ideas, to provide support in taking care of the kids, all while trying to work on his own research. He gently pushed me forward when I was ready to quit and always saw in me what I did not see in myself... the ability to succeed. He continues to be my biggest fan and most treasured confidante.

I was fortunate to also be supported by colleagues and a mentor who believed in me and guided me through the tenure process. Bode (as cited in Gillespie et al., 2005) and others (e.g., Gerdes, 2003) discuss the effectiveness of mentors and collegiality in increasing the success rates of new faculty. In fact, she reports collegiality as more important to faculty than mentoring. Acker and Armenti (2004) also note the importance of moral support for new faculty. Early in my tenure process the dean of education offered the support of a mentor to guide me through the tenure process. I gladly accepted this offer and persevered, working long hours over the next six years to build my teaching, scholarship and service portfolios. My mentor worked closely with me, helping me to navigate the writing, publication and tenure process. This was a rewarding experience for me as I could see my progress and development as an academic. I am grateful to the university for offering this support and even more grateful to my mentor for her willingness to work with me.

Another form of support came from the formation of a writing group within the faculty of education. The writing group consisted of academics who were new to the academy. A bond formed among the group members as they shared their fears and uncertainties about becoming researchers. My teenage daughter never really understood why I would need to be in a writing group especially at university. She asked if it was like getting “extra help” in school and then wondered why I still needed that help. I laughed when she recently asked: “Are you STILL in that writing group?” What my daughter did not understand was that while the writing group provided support for writing it was bigger than that. The writing group provided the much needed emotional support that is often lacking in academic institutions. It provided a means for making connections and a safe haven to express those feelings of self-doubt. It helped to reduce that feeling of being alone that is often present in an environment which seems to thrive on isolation and competition. The concept of collaboration seems to be foreign in academic settings yet one of the projects I enjoyed most involved working with members of the writing group on a paper. We have learned from one another, grown as writers and researchers, and we have also built a support network where we feel safe.

As I sit here on this sunny Sunday morning reflecting on a recently attended funeral and the dawn of my 50th birthday I see the yellow in my kaleidoscope shining brightly. I am thankful for the support that I have received and appreciate its’ significance in my journey to becoming a researcher. As I reflect on this identity I still feel the urge to try to capture those ever changing colors of my kaleidoscope and keep them. Yet, I am realizing that I cannot really hold onto those colors. Those colors like becoming a researcher are part of, an ever changing process. Just as the colors of the kaleidoscope change with every movement so too do my colors as I navigate the road of research. The continual weaving and intertwining of my own professional and personal journey ensure that the colors in the pattern of my kaleidoscope continue to shift and change.

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