Shaping Pedagogical Identities: A Collaborative Autoethnography of a Virtual Doctoral Student Pedagogy Peer Mentoring Group

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Abstract: *In this collaborative autoethnography (CAE), we examine a virtual doctoral (PhD) student pedagogy peer mentoring group's experience within a social work program at a northeastern U.S. public research university. Our focus is on the experiences of PhD students who are preparing to teach. Utilizing CAE as our methodological approach, we identified themes salient to our group experiences. Key themes include navigating role and identity transitions, the value of community, the need for enhanced institutional support, and the role of educators as gatekeepers. Our findings underscore peer mentorship as a crucial component of doctoral training, not only for fostering camaraderie and reducing isolation, but also for enhancing teaching preparedness. We recommend implementing structured peer mentorship, expanding pedagogical training, and strengthening institutional support to better prepare doctoral students for teaching.*

Keywords: *Doctoral education, pedagogy, peer mentorship, collaborative autoethnography, higher education, teaching preparation*

Graduate school offers professional growth and a foundation for an academic career beyond dissertation preparation (Fernandez et al., 2019). However, a primary role of doctoral education—preparing graduates for teaching (Kurzman, 2015)—is often underemphasized in many doctoral (PhD) programs (Bonner et al., 2020; Bullin, 2018). Social work PhD programs have been criticized for not adequately preparing students for this vital role (Kurzman, 2015). This lack of preparation is evident as less than half of social work programs view educating PhD students to teach as central to their curriculum or require a teaching course, and only 23% require a teaching internship (Drisko et al., 2015). Current recommendations—not requirements—for doctoral student-instructors suggest they teach at least one class independently (Kurzman, 2015). In response we propose the implementation of pedagogy peer mentoring groups within doctoral programs. This innovative approach aims to address the identified gaps in pedagogical training and provide emotional support (Meanwell & Kleiner, 2014), enhancing students' preparedness and confidence to teach.

The transition from student to teacher during a PhD program is full of challenges (Meanwell & Kleiner, 2014). First-time instructors often struggle with the emotional demands of teaching and may feel unprepared for the emotional labor involved, including managing student expectations, maintaining authority, and coping with intense feelings after particularly successful or difficult class sessions (Meanwell & Kleiner, 2014). These challenges relate to three common assumptions about first-time teaching. First, there is an assumption that teaching graduate students requires the same skills as teaching other

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educational levels (Macleod et al., 2019). However, teaching graduate students requires fostering advanced, independent, academic thinking. Many PhD students lack training in these pedagogical methods, leaving them unprepared to support graduate students' intellectual development (Macleod et al., 2019). Second, teaching is not always regarded as a "serious intellectual pursuit" (East & Chambers, 2007, p. 811), leading to the misconception that PhD students do not need formal teaching preparation. However, first-time teaching can be emotionally demanding (Caires et al., 2012; Meanwell & Kleiner, 2014), and PhD students may be unprepared for the emotional demands, time commitment, and exhaustion that come with it (Meanwell & Kleiner, 2014). Third, there is a tendency to overlook the role of instructors' social identities—including age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, class—in shaping their teaching experiences. Doctoral student-instructors report a lack of respect from students (Lu et al., 2019) even though evaluations suggest their teaching quality is comparable to that of other instructors (Thyer et al., 2011). PhD graduates receive little support in developing and managing their classroom identities (Lu et al., 2019; Morgenshtern & Novotna, 2012). These assumptions may leave PhD students unprepared for teaching.

To assist PhD students with teaching preparation, social work schools have implemented a range of teaching-related programs, including teaching seminars taken during students' first semester of teaching (Meanwell & Kleiner, 2014; Pelton, 2014), workshops (Rinfrette et al., 2015), post-master's field experience requirements for teaching core courses (Kurzman, 2015), and assessments of teaching readiness (Pelton, 2014). In our program, a teaching seminar is required for third year PhD students to provide preparation for teaching social work courses. The seminar covers pedagogical theories, course development, classroom facilitation, and accreditation standards. Students develop teaching philosophy statements, engage in structured reflections, and teach a class contemporaneously with the seminar. Given that approximately half of social work doctoral programs require a teaching course, accredited programs have room for improvement in pedagogical preparation.

U.S. Higher Education Context

The shift towards a business model and increased reliance on adjunct faculty have impacted teaching quality in U.S. higher education (Burghardt, 2021; Lucal, 2015). Students are generally less economically well-off than prior generations, as bachelor's degrees become necessary for entry-level positions, and are increasingly exhausted as they must participate in the labor market while completing degrees for stagnant wages (Lucal, 2015). Market demands amid rising inequality under neoliberalism has led to an increase in Master of Social Work (MSW) programs (Burghardt, 2021), raising concerns about the educational quality in these expanding programs (Karger, 2012). Under neoliberal conditions, social work is dependent on a complex mix of funding from private and public sectors and is increasingly asked to comply with bureaucratic standards of evidentiary "success" focused on short-term, low-cost solutions to some of life's more intransigent micro and macro problems (Watkins-Hayes, 2009). Among these are poverty/inequality, discrimination/racism, child abuse and neglect/reforming a broken and racist foster care system, mental health and substance use disorders, and imprisonment/mass incarceration.

Due to philosophical and historical conflicts between the Charity Organization Societies and the Settlement House Movement, significant changes in funding and oversight since the early 20th century, and the cyclical nature of our nation's attitude toward the social safety net, the MSW is a professional degree requiring skill sets that do not always cohere in meaningful ways (Fisher et al., 2021). Are we therapists? Child welfare workers? Policy advocates? Community organizers? Social change agents? Social control agents? We have been all of them, at times, and to some degree, are all of them now, though rising numbers of us become individual and family therapists (Specht & Courtney, 1995).

Increasingly, MSW degrees are offered through expedited programs, raising concerns among faculty and professionals about the preparedness of the coming wave of social work practitioners and academics (Burghardt, 2021). The magnitude of the challenges we face, and the content of our code of conduct (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021), advance the "explicit expectation that the educational rigor required to meet them will be exacting" (Burghardt, 2021, p. 74). Yet pedagogy is increasingly de-emphasized with students and faculty. Burghardt (2021) notes that "while a vast majority see teaching as a primary part of their job,… faculty 'get little support in improving how they teach and spend less time in the class than in the past'" (p. 78). How do we reconcile the ever more challenging requirements of our work amid historic inequality, and the coming effects of a climate disaster, with the deskilling and deprofessionalization of social work?

Pedagogy Peer Mentoring Groups

Although nearly all U.S. social work PhD programs aim to prepare students for teaching, only half require completing a pedagogy course (Maynard et al., 2017). Our virtual pedagogy peer mentoring group was designed to provide a supportive and informal space for sharing experiences, discussing teaching strategies, and receiving peer feedback—a promising model for doctoral student-instructor success (Katz et al., 2019).

Group mentoring is "a collection of three or more individuals, connected by their social relationship, distinctly gathered for the specific and shared purpose of intentionally challenging and supporting the others to enhance personal growth and professional skills/development of the others" (Kroll, 2016, p. 56). Peer group mentoring is a subtype of group mentoring that benefits its participants by providing collaborative input into personal and professional needs (Huizing, 2012). Canadian doctoral students have called peer mentorship "an under-utilized resource with great capacity to foster human and social capital within and between cohorts of graduate students" (Preston et al., 2014, p. 63). Although peer mentoring appears to have positive effects for graduate students, there is a paucity of literature that examines the utility of peer pedagogical support (Joyce & Hassenfeldt, 2020). In a study of graduate teaching assistants (TAs), Joyce and Hassenfeldt (2020) found that TAs were receptive to peer mentors and other teaching development opportunities. Noonan et al. (2007) determined that relationships forged through peer mentorship provided PhD students with meaningful professional and personal connections. Doctoral student-instructors in Canada developed a peer pedagogy group due to a perceived lack of institutionalized support for emerging instructors (Bailey et al., 2016) and suggested that doctoral programs include teacher training in their curriculum.

Our program, housed in a northeastern U.S. public research university, requires a pedagogy course offered during students' third year—the first semester they are expected to teach. Historically, students have wanted additional pedagogical support before and after this required course. The group we participated in filled a gap identified by current and emerging doctoral student-instructors. Those of us who joined the group desired peer mentoring to supplement what was provided by school administration and faculty mentors.

Peer Support and Isolation During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increased sense of disconnect and isolation (Pantell & Shields-Zeeman, 2020), highlighting the need for innovative support structures. In line with current literature, our reflections and conversations in our group highlight experiences of isolation that were exacerbated during COVID and were discussed as a precipitator to starting our group. Staying connected virtually can enhance social connectedness and decrease feelings of loneliness (Pantell & Shields-Zeeman, 2020). During a PhD program, support from peers, mentoring from advanced students, professional development opportunities, and informal interaction with peers are instrumental in providing emotional support to decrease isolation (Janta et al., 2014). In line with literature on providing emotional support during PhD programs, our group stayed connected virtually during a time when this was necessary, we built connections, received support from peers, supported each other professionally, and had an opportunity for advanced students to mentor junior students.

Group Process

The formation of our virtual pedagogy peer mentoring group arose from a need for enhanced pedagogical support among students. The group was formed by a third-year doctoral student-adjunct instructor who invited all current PhD students in our program to attend. Seven students participated, representing a third of our program. Most group members were second- and third-year students, and all had MSW degrees. The group met biweekly for one semester via videoconferencing due to COVID-19. We began each meeting with a check-in. Group members who were actively teaching discussed student-related issues that could benefit from group discussion, sharing their experiences and challenges openly with the group. Those not yet teaching spoke candidly and provided a student viewpoint. At the end of the semester, we wrote about our individual and collective experiences related to the group. We split into two writing collectives: those currently teaching and those preparing to teach. This collaboration is authored by three students belonging to the latter collective.

Methods

Research Design and Approach

Autoethnography

Autoethnography (AE), as a method of research and inquiry, emerged from anthropology in the 1970s (Chang, 2013). A subset among self-study research approaches, AE focuses on the self in a larger context, exploring sociocultural and political forces at work in the individual lives of authors/researchers (Hamilton et al., 2008). According to Chang (2013), among its common features are using the researcher's own experiences as the primary data and an interest in explicating social phenomena. Methodologically, AE is pragmatic. Data are typically recorded as narratives, however, it is up to the author/subject how best to communicate their experiences to their audience (Witkin, 2014). It is useful to underline that AE's merits are not meant to be judged according to objectives like generalizability or reproducibility. Instead, AE "resides in the interstices between research and literature" (Witkin, 2014, p. 3). AE often includes a cultural component, revealing something about the group to which the researcher belongs—their professional identity, the way structural and societal forces are managed by their group, their common thoughts, and actions.

Collaborative Autoethnography. Collaborative autoethnography (CAE) allows researchers to work in a community, typically in groups of two to four, to utilize AE in a social context. CAE allows researchers to "work together, building on each other's stories, gaining insight from group sharing, and providing various levels of support as they interrogate topics of interest for a common purpose" (Chang et al., 2013, p. 23). Researchers engaged in CAE listen to one another's views, reflect on their own assumptions, and challenge one another (Chang, 2013). CAE augments AE and addresses some of its methodological and ethical challenges by valuing others' experiences and allowing greater anonymity (Lapadat, 2017). PhD students have employed CAE to explore mentorship (Gurvitch et al., 2008), identity formation among students of color (Murakami-Ramalho et al., 2008), writing groups (Vacek et al., 2019), immigrants' teaching experiences (Morgenshtern & Novotna, 2012), and peer support (McPhail-Bell & Redman-MacLaren, 2019). Additionally, CAE was an appropriate methodological approach during COVID-19 as it allowed for ethical qualitative inquiry through self-reflection and collaboration in an "unprecedented time of lockdown, self-isolation and social distancing" (Roy & Uekusa, 2020, p. 384).

Data Collection

To explore our experiences in a pedagogy peer mentoring group as PhD students who were not yet teaching, we followed Chang et al.'s (2013) concurrent and full collaboration CAE model, which required all research team members to be engaged in every stage of the research. Our preliminary data collection consisted of individual reflections written at the conclusion of the academic semester. The reflections were shared within the group and, inspired by Ngunjiri and colleagues (2010), we employed a probing technique to elicit

deeper insights. We engaged in group meaning-making, followed by individual meaning-making, and concluded with group writing. Throughout our iterative CAE process, we met biweekly to discuss our individual reflections, focusing on identifying common themes and divergent experiences. Memories and emotions provide useful data in autoethnographic work (Poulos, 2021) and our data consisted of personal memory, recollection, and self-reflection (Chang et al., 2013).

Data Analysis

We employed thematic analysis to identify and interpret key themes that emerged from our reflections. The process was collaborative, with each team member involved in the analysis to ensure multiple viewpoints. We used close reading methods to extract themes and gather insights from our experiences. Close reading entails pulling out and interpreting important meanings that are suggested, or implicit, within a text (Paul & Elder, 2008). To ensure rigor, the first and second authors reviewed the reflections independently, identified themes, and convened to compare findings and agree on a list of codes. We manually checked coding for agreement to ensure consistency in our interpretations. To maintain critical reflexivity and acknowledge our positionality, we maintained awareness of our historical selves and shifting identities (Denzin, 2002; England, 1994). Data collection and analysis spanned one and a half years, allowing for a thorough and reflective exploration. The reflections and derived themes from this process are presented in the following section.

Results

Personal Reflections

Student A

Even though there is an implicit expectation in my PhD program that students will become professors, few assignments are designed to enhance teaching skills. As I entered my final semester of classes, I felt a need for additional pedagogical training. I will take a required pedagogy course when I start teaching, but part of me wishes I could complete it beforehand, even though it will be useful as I navigate teaching for the first time. After I received my first teaching assignment, I attended a seminar for rising doctoral student-instructors. The seminar, however, provided minimal information on pedagogy. I was encouraged to attend university-wide professional training seminars that sounded useful. These, however, were located on a different campus an hour away from my school. Attending this seminar heightened my desire for a dedicated space for rising doctoral student-instructors to discuss teaching-related concerns with current student-instructors. And I wanted to do this before I started teaching.

The pedagogy peer support group exemplifies the supportive school culture amongst PhD students that I have experienced in my program thus far. The group consisted of seven students: two from my cohort, three I had previously taken classes with, and one I met for the first time. Folks spoke candidly about their teaching experiences and shared opinions freely. Everyone seemed interested in cultivating a welcoming and supportive culture. And

all of this was happening as COVID raged through the country and world. Our large public research university, along with many other schools in the United States, moved most learning online. Group members were teaching remotely, and the group met remotely. Videoconferencing made it easy to meet, especially since a handful of us do not live in the immediate school vicinity.

A classmate a year ahead of me initiated the group. I immediately decided to join. I hoped to learn from my colleagues and get ahead on preparing to teach. During group meetings, doctoral student-instructors introduced dilemmas and difficulties they encountered, and they also shared what went well. I sometimes felt like a student peeking into the life of my professors. One ongoing discussion was about the need for balance between how much support, referred to as "handholding" by some, was helpful for students. We discussed instructor-related dilemmas such as burnout, the dual role of doctoral student-instructors, grading and class prep time-management, and feelings of isolation. As the semester carried on, discussions about students' and instructors' pandemic-related isolation became more frequent. Group members shared incidents of students turning off their cameras during online class sessions while those who kept cameras on appeared distracted. COVID-induced isolation and inattention affected students and instructors in various ways. Group members remarked that the pedagogy group helped reduce these feelings of isolation.

As I listened to my colleagues speak about their teaching experiences, I thought back to my undergraduate and graduate school years. As a poor immigrant and first-generation college student, I had to figure out college for myself. I was not socialized to the norms of academia, and I did not know how to approach professors and administrators. I felt grateful for the opportunity to be in college. Now, as I approached the opportunity to teach, I faced fears about my self-perceived limited understanding of academia. Although I completed college, the process proved challenging. I was academically dismissed during my second year of school. Woefully unprepared, I did not know when or how to seek help. Luckily, a mentor took an interest in me and helped me to better understand the academic world. They later inspired and supported me when I applied to MSW programs. Now, as I approached my first teaching assignment, I again felt like an impostor and was in search of support. I found myself asking: Am I smart enough to teach others? Do I have enough experience? Will I be able to convey my sense of excitement about the subject matter to my students? As I grapple with impostor syndrome, I see how my experiences and various identities—first-generation college student, immigrant, queer, woman, lived experience of mental illness, class straddler (Lubrano, 2005)—encompass all areas of my life, including here. I hope to provide mentorship for other class straddlers—first-generation students whose poor or working-class backgrounds make higher education an unfamiliar and uninviting space and result in feelings of not belonging to either group.

Hearing colleagues' experiences normalized my feelings of "not knowing" what to do. I was not alone in not knowing, and I had a support system. My anxieties around the types of classroom issues I may encounter were eased and I learned about various teaching approaches—from "let students sink or swim" to "handholding" and everything in between. I realized I do not have to take the same approach with each student or with each assignment. As I considered what kind of instructor I aspired to be, I asked myself: How

will I set boundaries for myself in a way that allows students to flourish? Linking classroom assignments to practice experience resonated greatly for me, and it felt imperative in a practical master's program. Ultimately, the pedagogy peer group provided a space to stay connected during COVID in a way that was structured yet not burdensome. It was not just another video call that I had to attend. The group was social, focused, and purposeful, and it got me thinking back to my days as an MSW student over a decade ago. Which professors do I remember? Do I recall what they said or what they did? One quickly came to mind. Their kind nature and ability to connect classwork to real-life issues was invaluable. I will try to emulate that for my future students as well.

Student B

I'm not sure why I agreed to participate in a pedagogy peer support group. I do not experience much interest in doing things in groups. I am a horrible social worker in that respect. I tend to view exhortations to engage in self-care and to build community in graduate education as cynical on the part of faculty and administrators. There really is not much time, and there is a sense in which it is just the institution shirking its responsibility to support students emotionally and professionally (while it asks professors to focus their attention on pretty much anything but pedagogy). Support each other, teach each other.

This is not unique to my own institution, of course, this is just the state of modern academics. It is increasingly based on a business model, and the emphases are on maintaining accreditation, gaining a higher national ranking, and avoiding conflict. Universities under neoliberalism must serve the customer—the students and their parents—not only from a pedagogical standpoint, but from a customer service standpoint. Minimizing discomfort. Making everyone feel uniquely important. There is also a very real sense in which I experienced a lot of trauma and watched a lot of Sylvester Stallone and Clint Eastwood movies as a kid. That is, my personality and self-image are part of the problem here. I sometimes imagine I am a self-made world beater beholden to no one.

I'm a straight, White, cisgender man, and by all appearances have that surplus of confidence which those ascribed characteristics herald in a society that overvalues them. Certainly, some part of my confidence stems from the advantages which accrue to those who tick those boxes. But we are all dynamic people who hold multiple identities, some more privileged than others. Graduate school was not inevitable or expected for me. Nearly all the men on both sides of my family worked in the local paper mill, dating back generations. I was a poverty-wage cook until I was 34 years old, which is when I earned my bachelor's degree. I do experience impostor syndrome, and very often feel like I do not belong. Class is little discussed in graduate programs, even in social work graduate programs. In contrast to racialized status, however, there are no external markers of my class background. I appear for all the world to belong where I am. In addition to my privilege, my confidence also stems from an understanding that I have the skills most people have in an academic environment, and more besides. The poverty, addiction, and violence I emerged from are not strictly disadvantages. I know I can survive here because I survived there. I also might not have survived it or survived it with my freedom and voting rights intact, had I not looked like I do.

To be frank, I cannot remember whether I had already agreed to do the peer teaching group when I experienced an administrative onboarding and airing of concerns meeting run by a professor/administrator and an administrative assistant. Either way, from that meeting, it was very apparent we would have to do it ourselves—the discussions of pedagogy, maintaining discipline and collegial interactions, ground rules, discussion formats, ways to tweak and enable participation. The professor/administrator and the assistant grounded everything in processes related to administrative disciplinary procedures for students and suggested that we undertake a lot of unpaid training on our own time through the main university, which is physically quite distant from the school of social work. There were some suggestions about how to order instructor copies of textbooks, but honestly that was it. Largely it was administrators anticipating logistical issues we might face that they might then have to resolve and clarifying the circumstances under which they could and should be bothered.

I probably joined the group so I was not saying no to everything. And because those unpaid trainings are not set up for us as students at the school of social work in physical or administrative ways. And because summer is when PhD students are supposed to work on articles for publication if they want to be competitive in the job market. And because I have a small child. I probably would not make it to many trainings, and if they do not care to mandate training and pay for it, if professionally trained teachers for MSW students is not a budget line item, who am I to quibble? I am probably not nearly frightened enough of teaching. I figure I will just be good at it like John Rambo would be good at it. If they're inclined to agree, so be it. And yes, I am both kidding and not kidding.

I am motivated less by community, than by a sort of anger about the corporatization of education, and a sense of responsibility to students. Preparing to teach is an interesting moment of role transition, of identification with the student in conceptualizing one's role as an instructor. Of responsibility. Of wondering what it might be like to be taught by yourself. Talking with people who might, like me, have never taught and are struggling with the same concerns; talking with people ahead of me who are teaching and who are pressed up against a lack of preparedness (and the details of that unpreparedness); with people who are several years in and still feel out of place—all of that has undeniable value. Are there personalities like mine? Philosophies like mine? Am I a disciplinarian? Is it easier to start stern and get "cool" than it is to start "cool" and gradually find your level as an agent of control? How is this school different from the school I attended for my MSW? Are my expectations for students' seriousness and professionalism reasonable?

I enjoy an approach to pedagogy that I think is in decline. I like teachers who know the material and can speak extemporaneously. I like teachers who have a plan, who keep things moving, and who challenge students' assumptions. I like an expert. There are parts of the wildly popular Freire/Audre Lorde approach that I admire and wish to emulate, in terms of facilitating class discussion, and of fostering involvement and the bringing of the "self" into the room, but I do not think that should be the whole class. I have felt at times in my own education that my teachers and professors were hiding behind their slides and their participation models, that they were not confident in their intellect and reasoning ability. This is not to say that people should be any further along than they are as scholars and

teachers, but that they should know what they do not know, be upfront and comfortable with that, and have some confidence in their perspective and ability.

I cannot really be as knowledgeable and fluent as I aspire to be, yet, without establishing familiarity with the material I will be teaching. Still, I harbor ambitions not to be too dependent on slideshows and videos to get the material across. I want to challenge students who are likely, statistically, to be too micro-focused to think of their practice in the macro context. I was interested to see what my colleagues could offer in terms of personality and time management, culture building exercises, and establishing some balance of authority and horizontal engagement despite relatively novice-level experience. I received data on all of this, from colleagues with differing philosophies and levels of expertise, and that data will be valuable as I develop my own style. This engagement on the subject of pedagogy was not going to be offered to us by the faculty or administration ahead of time. If the third years, fully immersed in teaching, believed this was going to be helpful or necessary, I was inclined to agree.

I was fortunate to be a year behind those of my colleagues whose first experience teaching was in the context of distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, and behind those, too, for whom this was still a relatively new experience. Some of the topics covered under the rubric of COVID challenges may not be things I will experience directly when I begin teaching in person in the fall, though the future is uncertain. I believe, however, that pandemic conditions helped to center topics like student mental health; encouraging participation in creative, person-centered ways; and how to manage the modern, often at least partly digital classroom—something we will all likely be tasked with managing at some point given the corporate model of modern education.

I walked away feeling very strongly that I needed clear expectations for students ahead of time, that I would need to state some fairly obvious things in the first class. I came away believing in the necessity of checking in personally with students early on when confronted with inattention or missed deadlines. We discussed the responsibility we have to the profession to act as gatekeepers, and to do so thoughtfully and with empathy—that is, to help populate the profession with compassionate, hard-working, competent people across identities. The group also seemed like an effective way to concentrate and organize our resources for the sharing of classroom exercises, useful readings, forms to better navigate gender identity in classrooms, as well as less sexy things like what university resources are available to us and what their phone numbers are. I know there are slides I can use, which are collaboratively assembled, when I ultimately fall short of my own unreasonable expectations as an orator. In a sense, while not compelled to join the group by the siren song of community, the pooling of information and effort that community affords us ended up being one of the most prized outcomes for me.

Student C

When I heard that the upper cohorts in my PhD program were starting a pedagogy peer support group, my first thought was that of excitement. A lot of this excitement was due in part to needing a connection to others. I had been feeling isolated for much of the year. I tend to think of myself as part of the "COVID-19 Pandemic Cohort." I am one of only two people in my cohort that started our PhD program at the height of the pandemic. This year

has been difficult being on a first-year island and I wanted to hear from the cohorts above me to build a connection to the program.

A big part of my academic experience was missing due to not having met anyone in person. I lacked the needed support that comes from being in-person, running into each other in the halls or in the doctoral lounge. I needed to connect with peers, even virtually. An open forum online platform for peer support would be better than a constricted experience in a formal classroom setting. I felt that there was no open space being provided to us for teaching support. Although a formal teaching course exists, it felt necessary to have something informal for peers to bounce ideas off one another. Formal arrangements are not enough in academia and there needs to be an informal space to foster peer support, which I knew I was missing even though I had not experienced it yet. I kept thinking that having in-person support suddenly taken away must have been devastating for my peers. In my MSW program, peer support was crucial in helping me make it through the program.

In my graduate research assistantship, I served as a manager on a project that involved working with BSW and MSW students. It was a virtual social work field placement that paired students with older adults in the community. I felt comfortable with the older adult population as my professional experience has been working as a geriatric social worker but felt myself lacking when it came to being confident in working with students. I needed support in this area but was unsure who to turn to. The peer support group seemed like the perfect missing link to help me with this support.

I am nervous about teaching, but know that this is normal when experiencing something new. This nervousness should be talked about and normalized to help relieve feelings of isolation. Although I was not teaching at the time, I was in a role that required teaching skills. I felt recognized, validated, and supported when a third-year doctoral student-instructor offered the group to all students in my program. Being invited made me feel like my opinions and experiences mattered. It also felt great that the upper cohorts wanted to help the newer cohorts prepare for teaching. It appeared that they would have liked this sort of group when they were preparing to teach. I got the impression that my peers needed the support too, even if it had to be online, due to missing out on the experience of being in-person this academic year.

Although others may be hesitant to join the group due to a lack of experience in the academy, I only sometimes experience the “impostor syndrome” that other students talk about. I feel disconnected from it. I recognize this is because I feel comfortable in academic settings, having many family members with doctoral and other advanced degrees. I am also White and grew up well off. I know this makes me extremely privileged and may lead to confidence I have going into academia that others may not. Others in the peer support group were also inexperienced, and this helped me feel like I belonged in the group. Interestingly, my privileged identity and reconciling the guilt that comes with it overrides the feelings I have of oppression by being a queer woman. I realize that this privileged feeling and comfort in academic settings calls for a need to hone in on it and make sure I do not ever mistake my privilege and comfort for experience. Self-awareness is important for professional social workers, and I attempt to keep my privileged identity in mind when providing and receiving peer support. Privileged folks, including those in the social work

field, should not ignore their backgrounds. I have used this self-awareness in our group, in the classroom, and as a social worker. Social workers have historically been unaware of how members of oppressed groups may feel when we come in "to help." Social workers must study and critically examine this history.

The pedagogy peer support group helped me feel more connected to my peers. I also gained knowledge about how to teach social work students. A theme that fostered our connection was the concept of social work professors as gatekeepers for the profession. One of my peers mentioned this throughout our group meetings and it stuck with me. We have social work values prescribed to us by NASW, such as the core values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (NASW, 2021). While these values are extremely important for social workers to uphold, we must engage with social work students to call into question our professional history and what we can do as future changemakers. To question and to be critical of our world is a way that things will progress for the better. As emerging social work gatekeepers and rising academics, we should balance not only holding our core values, but also encourage students to question, be critical of, and be innovative in the profession. In this manner, we can help shape a profession of individuals who think for themselves, create meaningful change, and treat others with dignity and worth.

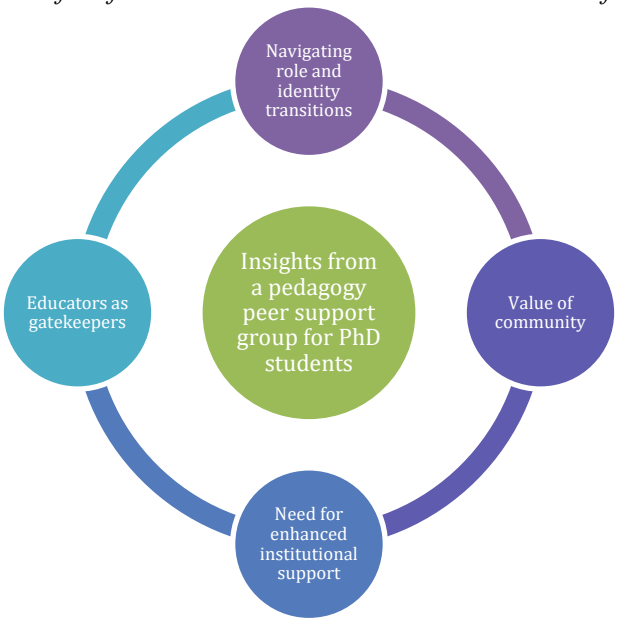
Thematic Findings

We identified several themes within our reflections (see Figure 1): (a) navigating role and identity transitions; (b) value of community; (c) need for enhanced institutional support; and (d) educators as gatekeepers.

Navigating Role and Identity Transitions

One key theme was the navigation of role and identity transitions during our shift from students to doctoral student-instructors. This transition, intertwined with our intersectional identities, brought opportunities and challenges. Through an awareness of the impending transition, we consciously managed our expectations of ourselves with a sense of anticipation and preparedness. We conceptualized our future "professor" selves and drew upon positive experiences with professors and mentors to shape our aspirations. Through autoethnographic methods, we identified the tension in this identity shift, and, similar to others (e.g., Kumar, 2021), the process helped clarify our academic identities. A common theme was that our social identities would influence our future academic careers ambivalently—potentially leading to feelings ranging from imposter syndrome to reflections on privilege—and we hoped to mentor diverse student groups. The peer group provided a platform for self-reflection about personal and professional identity growth, suggesting that pedagogy groups can provide a space for identity development for aspiring instructors (Murphy et al., 2014) and support multiple identity development. This theme highlights the transformative potential of becoming an educator through identity reflection and role transition development.

Figure 1. *Themes Identified from Doctoral Students' Collaborative Reflections*



Value of Community

The value of community emerged as a theme, particularly the mentorship from senior students and the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The initiation of the peer group and invitation to join from a senior cohort member exemplified the supportive PhD culture. The group served as a valuable resource for exchanging teaching approaches and philosophies, helping members in developing their own teaching styles. This peer-led initiative filled a gap that was not addressed by formal institutional support. The pandemic significantly influenced students' experiences, as many were experiencing isolation due to a newly remote learning environment. The lack of casual encounters in academic settings due to pandemic restrictions left students with a need for connection. The group provided connection and helped us prepare for the challenges of the modern and sometimes digital classroom. It also provided us with a sense of belonging and reduced feelings of isolation. These experiences underscore the importance of fostering community and the value of peer-led initiatives.

Need for Enhanced Institutional Support

The theme of the need for enhanced institutional support emerged in our analysis. Our reflections revealed perceived gaps in our pedagogical preparation. While we received administrative information, we were looking for more pedagogical training. This included the practical transition from student to instructor, which was not being addressed. The second gap was pedagogy in general. We expressed a desire for more comprehensive pedagogical support beyond the existing pedagogy course. The existing course was valuable but insufficient. There was a need for earlier and more practical training. Our

reflections revealed a sentiment that institutional support around pedagogy was lacking. The lack of support was underscored by a suggestion that students undertake unpaid training on our own time. We also identified a need for informal spaces, as the existing formal structures seemed to lack collaborative learning needed for teaching. The peer group became a valuable resource for sharing teaching materials and filled the gap left by the institution. Our reflections suggest a need for institutions to provide more comprehensive, practical, and accessible pedagogical support along with spaces for informal resource sharing.

Educators as Gatekeepers

The final theme was educators as gatekeepers. This theme encompassed our dual responsibility in shaping the future of the profession while addressing students' needs and challenges. Group discussions highlighted the gentle balance between providing support and fostering independence for students. The role of educators as gatekeepers was viewed as both an academic responsibility and an obligation to ensure a compassionate and dedicated social work field. This theme played an important role in fostering a deeper understanding of the function of gatekeeping in the interplay between teaching responsibilities and the duty of shaping the future of the social work profession, while maintaining reflexivity around identity and inequality and ensuring that gatekeeping not reproduce the inequalities our profession seeks to redress.

Discussion

Our CAE explored how pedagogy peer mentoring groups help address gaps in PhD teaching preparation. Autoethnographic and reflective methods provided a valuable approach to understanding academic identities and identity transitions (Kumar, 2021; Sussman et al., 2004). These methods offered personal insights and a framework for integrating reflective practices into pedagogical practice, with broader implications for higher education and teaching training. The themes of *Navigating Role and Identity Transitions* and *Educators as Gatekeepers* demonstrated the group's role in sharing experiences and strategies. We found peer mentorship to be vital in our journey of becoming educators. Consistent with prior research, we found that peer mentorship fosters community and reduces isolation through social support (Maher et al., 2013). It not only builds camaraderie between cohorts but also helps reduce isolation during the process of becoming academics. The *Value of Community* theme extends beyond individual experiences, suggesting a collaborative educational environment, while *Social Work Educators as Gatekeepers* has implications for how educators view their role in shaping the future of the profession. It suggests a need for a pedagogical approach that balances academic rigor with empathy and understanding.

Limitations

Our experiences, while insightful, have limitations. The CAE method, rich in personal and contextual detail, may include subjective biases. Our experiences occurred in a specific

institutional context and may not be applicable to other PhD students in social work, in other disciplines, or in universities with different resources, culture, and student demographics.

Recommendations for Doctoral Education

In addition to the theoretical implications, we propose several practical applications for doctoral programs to enhance teaching preparation. First, structured peer mentorship should be formally integrated into doctoral training, including mentorship programs where senior students guide junior peers. Research shows that structured mentorship improves academic confidence, teaching preparedness, and professional identity formation (Lorenzetti et al., 2019; Marx et al., 2021), and our experiences showed that mentorship from more senior students enhanced our own teaching readiness. Programs can institutionalize peer mentorship by embedding it into pedagogy courses.

Second, comprehensive pedagogy training should be expanded beyond coursework and include applied experiences such as peer observation, co-teaching, and structured discussions on instructional strategies. Programs should provide opportunities for doctoral students to refine their teaching approaches through peer-led engagement and feedback (Lorenzetti et al., 2019; Oddone Paolucci et al., 2021).

Lastly, informal and virtual peer support networks should be recognized and supported as valuable spaces for professional identity development and knowledge-sharing. Studies indicate that virtual mentorship reduces isolation and enhances academic engagement (Webber et al., 2021), and peer-led initiatives provide sustainable mentorship structures when formal institutional support is limited (Marx et al., 2021). Institutions should facilitate these efforts by offering resources for peer groups, structured meeting spaces, and mentorship platforms to foster a comprehensive approach to teaching preparation.

Conclusion

Our experience highlights the crucial role of peer mentoring groups in enriching doctoral education, particularly in equipping PhD students for future roles as educators. Through our CAE, we gained valuable insights into PhD students' needs and offered a model for integrating peer mentorship and pedagogy training into doctoral education. We advocate for formalized mentorship opportunities, particularly where institutional support is limited, as senior-junior peer mentorship can help students navigate role transitions, develop their academic identity, and refine their teaching skills. A peer-led model can complement formal pedagogical training by providing applied experiences such as co-teaching and peer observation. Overall, strengthening mentorship, teaching preparation, and institutional support will not only benefit PhD students as future educators, but also empower them to contribute to the advancement of their respective fields.

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