



HIDDEN EXPERIENCES OF DOCTORAL STUDENTS IN RESEARCH COURSES

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ABSTRACT

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The present study investigates the hidden experiences of students in the doctoral programs. This qualitative study was performed using the phenomenological method. The data were collected through the interview. The population consists of PhD graduates whose study period had passed. Using normal purposeful sampling, 45 graduates were interviewed. Strauss and Corbin method of data analysis was used for the analysis. 252 thematic phrases were divided to the five main themes: "The lack of cross-border communications", "failure in doing the main task", "lack of social justice", "lack of economic justice", "non-equality of universities" and "lack of equal opportunities".

Contribution/ Originality: This study is one of very few studies which have investigated the experiences that PhD students acquire in universities while passing research courses and conducted by authors.

1. INTRODUCTION

The increasing pace of social changes and the process of evolutions in different fields of human knowledge, the emergence of specific branches of sciences and comparative sub-branches have reinforced the need to use new models and methods in the curricula of higher education. Innovative educational planners should align the programs of higher education with the aim of developing the body of knowledge from one hand, and promote a sociological and applied system of higher education which trains skilled and knowledgeable human resources in higher education centers on the other hand (Yarmohammadian, 2007).

So since the university is one of the key elements in the cultural, political, economic processes and scientific development in any country; but most pundits have highlighted three major functions including teaching, research and service for the university institution (Hassanzadeh, 2006).

In a study entitled "The Comparison of hidden learning in Azad and State universities in academic interactions from the perspective of students" Author concludes that students are influenced by hidden curriculum. There is

some problems in the formal curriculum and changes should be made in formal curriculum to address this leaning (Tonkaboni, 2015).

On the other hand, the educational system of any society is not free of hidden and obvious transference of norms and particular attitudes to learners, who are exposed to the formal programs and formulations of school and university for a long time; they find the experiences which indirectly or consciously shape the culture of society and the accepted values. The effectiveness of these experiences is far more direct methods and conscious efforts. Curriculum experts to describe the lessons and attitudes that form in the students influenced by contextual factors as well as their consequences offer the concept of the "hidden curriculum" (Iraqiya, 2010).

Researchers such as Mehrmohamadi (2008); Apple (1971); Apple and King (1977); Dreeben (1968); Martin (1967) and Gordon (1982) address the theoretical discussion on the concept of hidden curriculum and try to discover the unknown aspects of it in recent decades. According to previous studies, the assumption that universities of centers of science and regarding the increasing growth of different disciplines followed by the growing population of students at PHD level, students experience many problems in this level and witness the difficulties and obstacles universities might have. So in this study, in order to promote higher education experience of students, the research courses at PhD level will be discussed.

Fathi and Vahed (2006) studied citizenship educational programs and found that hidden curriculum can have an important role in teaching citizenship criteria beside the formal curriculum. The collection of communications, interactions with the authorities, and the general atmosphere prevailing the environment affects the behavior and attitudes of participants are the dimensions of the hidden curriculum that have a role in transferring values associated with citizenship education.

Ahola (2000) addressed the role of hidden curriculum in higher education in Finland. His main research questions were: "What students actually learn in college?" And "How do they learn it?". He points that the formal curriculum in higher education is more loose and less strictly planned compared to lower levels. Thus, there is more space for the hidden curriculum performance. His aim was to identify the framework of hidden curriculum in the higher education context and helps the students to understand the problems they face.

The conceptual framework that he used in his study was based on the opinions of Margolis (2001) and Bergenegouwen (1987). In this regard, the hidden curriculum can be analyzed using four separate categories that include: First, students must learn how to learn, because learning to be a student at the University is different with the formal curriculum assumptions. Second, students must learn their careers involving the certain ways of thinking and different practices that distinguish a profession. This is only partially covered partly by books and courses. Third, to learn how to be expert that includes learning thinking and knowledge and science operations shaped by the hierarchical structure of the formal curriculum. The last, the hidden curriculum is to learn the rules of the game that is necessary in order to survive in the social environment of university. Aspects of research in this study include: "Who is a student at the university? How s/he can survive? and also what is learned in college?" The results showed that what is learned at the university mainly consists of 7 dimensions including "professional power, self-control, orientation of scientific studies, orientation of study skills, social relationships, orientation of quasi-school studies and male overcome". Accordingly, the elements mostly learned in the hidden curriculum included "professional power, self-control, orientation of scientific studies".

The results of a study showed that the students recognized that their personal qualities and efforts are two terms of success in the university. Of the most important lessons they learned are: self-control, perseverance, time management, stress toleration and acceleration that are necessary for everyday life at the university. It is worth noting that these skills are also necessary for the workplace. On the other hand, some students believed that interest, willingness to learn new things, and the ability to learn critical thinking are the most important competencies to be earned at the university, that are the same as scientific orientation (Sari and Doğanay, 2009).

Townsend (1995) in a case study pointed the aspects such as the social structure of the classroom, the exercise of authority by teachers, laws governing the relations between professor and student, structural barriers within the university are involved in the formation of the hidden curriculum in higher education. In his idea, if certain rules and a support network are not established in the universities for selection supervisor professors and their communication with students, anyone will try to take advantage of the opportunities in order to guarantee his/her own survival and success .

Bergenegouwen (1987) is among the scholars who paid attention to the hidden curriculum in higher education. He investigates the nature of hidden curriculum and the role of academic motivation on shaping it. Students believed that their success in the test is subject to using technical jargon and concepts which are central to the professors' interest and controversy and argument in the classroom with instructors can have a negative impact on their grades. Unlike the unofficial pressure on students to obtain their degree, they believed that knowledge and understanding is more important than test scores.

Although hidden curriculum, is one of the important concepts born of educational planning discipline and one of its conceptual capitals [11]; but its nature has been always argued. The question of "what students experience by the hidden curriculum and how universities interact with each other in this period?" is always raised. The aim of this research is to search and offer solutions and strategies to improve the PhD research courses.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted in 2014 with the aim to study the experience of hidden curriculum of PhD students in the research course in universities. The research was qualitative and based on phenomenological method. 45 patients were interviewed, 28 from state universities, 13 from universities of medical sciences and 4 from Islamic Azad universities across the country in various fields. The researcher spent eight months on having direct and deep interviews with the participants; also, email and call were used to complete the interviews and examine their experiences. Sampling was purposeful because the selection criterion for the participants to conduct interviews was according to their research experience during their education.

The data collection was done using profound face to face dialogue between the participant and the researcher about 30 m to 1h. The interviews were all transcribed for better scrutiny. The findings and information were analyzed and interpreted through the categorization of interviews, highlighting the major issues, regulation and reviewing documentation and interviews, and data interpretation. The data were analyzed by Strauss and Corbin (2008) method. Then, open coding (reading data line by line, extracting key concepts and sentences, forming the categories and primary classes based on similarities and differences) and axial coding (data classification to determine the subcategories, forming the final classes) were used.

For eliciting meanings, texts were read several times. This step must be done carefully and the researcher should read the interview several times to extract meaning. In the next step, phrases that were directly related to the intended phenomenon were extracted of interviews and the important sentences were underlined. After that, each important sentence was recorded in the margin of the interview text and was "coded".

Then data were classified and formulized as theme clusters (main themes). Finally, a comprehensive description of the phenomenon under study, an overall picture of the phenomenon's essential structure i.e. the hidden curriculum of the PhD research course was presented [to determine the accuracy of the information obtained, four factors of credibility, transferability, reliability, and verifiability] were approved (Burns and Grove, 2007).

To validate the findings, they were shared with participants and correction was done by them. In terms of transferability, it was tried to take the necessary diversity into account and participants were from different disciplines including medical sciences, basic sciences, and humanities. Also in connection with the verifiability, it was tried to reach agreement among researchers, educators and advisors in correctly perceiving the events. And

finally for credibility, interviews continued until data saturation. The reliability of the study Kirk and Miller (1968) notes taking rules was used

3. FINDINGS

Investigations conducted on data obtained from interviews with 45 cases pointed to five main components of 230 thematic phrases, which are described below:

1. Failure in doing the main task of universities

One of the crucial tasks of universities around the world is training successful scholars and researchers which serve to human society. This task is one of the basic foundations of any university. It leads to national glory and pride if it is successful in training the scholars with perfection and excellence. Interviewee no. 11 stated: "scientific education has given way to copying and wasting time. While studying, I realized that the universities still have not been able to educate a few purely research professors whose only job is research and education in the country. Of course I do not want to criticize the cultural community and professors but students and universities are now promoting degrees not the knowledge...".

Interviewee no. 10 who was a graduate in the general surgery stated that: "professors have financial concerns from one hand, and the exhausting work of some other professors in certain fields such as surgery are the reason they do not mind research as they should. They did not have the opportunity to teach the basic issues of their own course, let alone research. Besides, since instructors should deliver a number of research articles to the university for their job promotion, and since they cannot do this alone; this heavy task is given to the newly arrived students who are not well trained for research. What they do? They copy others' theses and make everything easy for themselves and their instructors. Only, to make it new, they change the population, year, or the city in which the research is conducted". Hence, we can refer to "exploiting students' research for instructor s' job promotion, failure in educating the students as researchers due to busy schedule of instructors, unethical behavior at research (copying) due to the escape of students from sound research methods, and poor guidance by supervisors" as students' experiences in the research course of PhD level.

Another participant experiences "Educational vacuum of researcher from the social dimension". According to the interviews, participants referred to lack of attention to personal values, different cultures, and ethics in research courses and finally lack of attention to family and community. Interviewees stated that they do not pay attention to personal values and the student is treated as a novice and unprovoked person. On the other hand, some of the interviewees who were from the towns but studying in the country's major universities at the big cities pointed the neglect of cultural values and ethnics of students. Hence, higher education for research must take the personal and social rights of students into account, creates social bands and science groups to support scholars from different subcultures and provide support to researchers with diverse cultures and foster research ethics. It is better to avoid improper training of students' research skills.

On the other hand, economic dimension is another point of education. Some of the participants experienced research as an economic issue at Phd level and state that instructors and students are involved with the incomes from it. They assume that the main dimension of research has gradually given way to a business and instead of teaching and training the students and instructors to be interested in research; they get involved with big projects and high revenues. However, one cannot deny that any researcher needs fund for doing scientific research. But the interviewees stated that many professors and students were looking for the projects with high revenue and even these plans are considered only for the favorites and are never given to a new researcher.

On the other hand, it was common among many teachers that their income is from their research works, or their teaching salary does not meet their expenses. This issue also indirectly devalues research in society, reduces its place among the university students.

Interviewee number 14 (Phd of mind engineering) was one of the people who expressed his full satisfaction from the budget of PhD level and was content by his professor who was looking for projects with macro budgets. He said: "professor,...he always looked for projects that could receive substantial funds for him. In his own words, your efforts should be paid. Hence, he accepted the heavy mining projects so both him and his students could benefit." According to interviews it seems that one of the experiences of students in research course is education of scholars who only pay attention to the economic dimension of research and the main task of research which is to discover the facts, have been neglected. A number of participants however complained of their unpaid efforts and confirm their discontent. Interviewee no. 37 said: "the university had announced that students whose thesis work is a plan, I do not remember exactly about 0.5 to 1 point will be added to the final score of thesis. I remember that I get involved myself with a problem which was not profitable for me and even the total budget of it was given to my instructor and even they forgot to give me the research plan score. Interviewee no.7 stated: my research had been accepted, but believe me, I was so happy that I've graduated that I did not take the project money.

2. Lack of social justice in universities

Justice is one of the most significant words in the language of human civilization and is vital to be established for every person. Even a cruel individual does not deny this issue. Justice is considered one of the main goals of the mission of the prophets in the Holy Quran. In fact, justice is one of the concepts that regard the collective wisdom of all human beings good (Amirkhani and Pourezzat, 2010).

Based on the interviews, social justice in the university could be named as one of the most important issues in the research period. Interviewee no.45 stated: "What I felt during this period was lack of social justice in the academy. I saw an Afghan who was deprived of education in our country because of certain kinds of rules by the Ministry of Science, Hezar (2011) stated: since social justice in the society leads to security, trust to the work of authorities, and religiosity. It will guarantee the safety and promotion of society, if applied in all firms and organizations especially universities.

3. Academic excellence over each other, inequality of society

One of the components of the analysis of the interviews was that the name and fame of the university overshadowed the research course of PhD level. A number of interviewees (19, 12, 13) stated that: "those universities who claim high scientific ranking doesn't avoid repetitive works, copies of others, etc. according to some graduates of these universities: it is unfortunate that such a rating is given to such universities." The rank and rate universities in the world as a routine matter and no one rejects rankings of universities, but it appears from interviews that criteria of classification should be specified in detail and clear. Second, assessor persons should be protected from any bias. And the third is that such people are not impressed by political and propaganda so that the classification of universities correct the inequalities in society. Interviewee no. 23 (a graduate of the Azad university) considered that the inequality of university is due to inappropriate ranking in the country. he believed "his university has a good place in the country, but at the time of the interview faculty he was told that if you are a graduate of the X University in the capital, we could give you scholarship for a public university and the stock exchange but now we can't..."

4. Lack of cross-border communication with other universities in the course of research

Today, the communication of country universities with foreign universities has become weak in the research fields. On the one hand, reduced research budgets in education organization have led to reduction of fellowships for foreign countries, and if there is any, it is available for a certain individuals. On the other hand, many of the achievements of the country's universities will not be heard clearly. So one of the neglected and hidden aspects of

PhD in management that was referred to by the interviewees [25, 23, 24, 52, 19, 31] include cross-border communications in the field of research

5. Lack of equal opportunities in universities

For many participants, some universities which are referred to as mother universities have more facilities and high budget compared to other universities in the country. The absence of facilities for the small cities, distance from the great universities, and no network connection were the dilemma for PhD students during the research course.

Also, many teachers tend to be transferred from smaller universities and work in larger centers. Interviewee no.20 said, "... I feel that the facilities of our university are much less compared to Tehran University. Some of disciplines were new and after holding one or two semesters, then they would think about the primary equipment and basics of that field. In my idea, unequal facilities such as lack of equipment or instructor-student are clearly observable in Tehran University.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Hidden curriculum in higher education institutions can include rules which are not stipulated that are necessary for the successful completion of formal training (Safaeimovahed and Attaran, 2013). The results include: failure to perform the main task of universities, lack of cross-border communication, lack of social and economic justice, lack of equal facilities

According to present study, educating real researchers is very weak now and the students try to copy from the theses of others and using article writing institutions. Also, everyone wants to obtain a degree and there may be few people who cares about research.

Lack of self-educating students, instructor's lack of time, not enough science research among professors, their multi-job and financial problems can be the factors that led to the failure of the main task of universities (research).

Among all effective factors on the research course, selecting the supervisor has a considerable effect on facilitating the trend of research course and its final quality (Robati *et al.*, 2015).

Vacuum of training scholars in the universities from the social dimension was one of the results of this study. To many of them, most universities do not pay attention to personal values, different cultures, ethics in research and ultimately to society and the family; these lead to a lack of training and support for research students in universities, which is consistent with the results of Iraqiya (2010).

The economic dimension of research was also highlighted. According to many participants, many teachers and students are in the competitive atmosphere to accept more thesis from one hand, and take high budget research plans and get distance from the main objective of research course, they pay attention to anything which unwillingly directs professors toward work.

Another result of study was that some universities are preferred over the others. Also, the tendency of students and university instructors to work and educate at those universities, not paying attention to new fields and universities who offer PhD education were found. However, biased ranking was among the complaints and criticisms on ranking to universities and was not hidden from the eyes of interviewees. Lack of communication with foreign universities and lack of scholarships, fellowships, etc. for the PhD students is another important factor in this study. Some of the participants pointed at unfair condition of scholarships, reduced fellowships for the students, and not having scientific communication with the world as the factors that made research unsuccessful at PhD level.

Lack of equal facilities in the universities is another experience of students. They state that due to the distance, universities should not be deprived of the necessary tools or have lower budget. This issue reduces the motivation of instructors and students.

Also, fellowships are not available for everyone, and selection criteria are based on relations not regulations. However, many interviewees were trying to use this situation, but none of them could take the opportunity. A small

number who experienced this situation referred to problems such as strange environment, unfamiliarity with the language and culture of that country, and financial problems. Also, positive cases such as learning more science, having a higher education degree, using great professors, using advanced equipment, and multiple published articles were mentioned.

Another problem faced by Iranian researches is access to library resources. The most important database in this field is ISI that can be used through different ways, like Elsevier online databank. The abstract of these articles are available easily but their full text is not free and a great cost should be paid for each article. Some students cannot afford this amount and money transfer has many problems as well due to sanctions. The students who were studying outside the city were more tangible.

The problem of paper publication and getting the degree from the university was another common problem among participants. In public idea “if you don’t have an acquaintance there, you cannot take the visa easily”. Some students looked for a professor’s guidance that can help in paper publication. In total, the research findings stated that hidden curriculum effects have a negative inverse effect on learning output (Bayanfar and Maleki, 2009).

Hence, there are many issues that affect the communication at the universities that somehow overshadowed its main task. These issues include preferring some universities over the others, the tendency of students and university instructors to work and educate at those universities, not paying attention to emerging and new fields, lack of equal facilities, lack of communication with foreign universities, lack of scholarships and fellowships for the PhD students, training students from economic dimension, degree orientation and copying other students’ theses, ignoring individual values, different cultures, and ethics of research.

In this study, first the goals, methods, risks, and benefits of research and also the volunteering nature of research were clarified for the participants. Their right to quit the research at any time was given. They were assured of the confidentiality of data. To this aim, the data analysis was presented using codes.

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