

Running header: WHOEVER GARDENS...GROWS

Whoever Gardens...Grows:  
Reflections of a Doctoral Student

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### **Planning the garden: Introduction**

“Gardeners have a vision that is evolving and flexible; that is staged to show improvements incrementally” (Gender, 2004). Gardening is a perfect analogy for explaining how I have engaged the Ed. D. degree program in higher education leadership studies. The gardening analogy has enabled me to reflect upon the transformation I have made as a doctoral student. As I write this essay, I shall use my experience as a gardener to reflect on my coursework, portfolio projects, and educational leadership philosophy and to demonstrate how I have grown as a collaborator, writer, educator, researcher, and leader.

### **Sowing the seeds: Establishing the groundwork to achieve a life aspiration**

In the summer of 2008 I moved to West Virginia with my husband, college-aged daughter and son, and elementary-aged daughter when I assumed the position of Director of Student Financial Assistance at Marshall University. Being transplanted in a different state introduced me to several new life experiences, the two most notable being a doctoral student and a gardener. I was enthusiastic about working at Marshall University, which seemed to be a perfect fit for my professional goals. Furthermore, because Marshall University offered a doctoral program in higher education leadership, I thought this could be, finally, the place and time for me to pursue an aspiration that I thought would never happen due to previous life circumstances. After becoming acclimated to a new state and employment and settling into our new home in Wayne, West Virginia, my life and my family’s life, had blossomed just as a perfectly landscaped garden under ideal growing conditions.

It was during the fall of 2009 that I decided to apply to the Ed. S. degree program in leadership studies. I actually wanted to apply to the Ed. D. degree program, but did not do so because I feared taking the required Miller Analogies Test (MAT) or the Graduate Record

Examination (GRE). I was afraid I would not attain a score that reached the 60<sup>th</sup> percentile – the minimum required for consideration of admission. I have never forgotten the feeling I had when I received the results of my Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores in high school many years ago. My scores were not commensurate with my academic performance. I was extremely disappointed and felt inadequate. My feelings of inadequacy apparently never went away. Nevertheless, I knew I would eventually take the MAT or GRE, but not until I gained the necessary confidence.

Spring semester, 2010, I enrolled and completed my first doctorate-level course, EDF 625 Qualitative Research, taught by Dr. Linda Spatig. During the same time period, I became a gardener. Over the course of four months I proved to myself that I could excel as a student taking a doctorate-level course on a subject that I knew nothing about and I could grow a bountiful garden even though I had never gardened before.

The results of my work both at school and in the garden demonstrated success. I thoroughly enjoyed the EDF 625 Qualitative Research course because Dr. Spatig introduced me to a different kind of research. Reading required qualitative research methods texts as well as *Pregnant Bodies, Fertile Minds: Gender, Race, and the Schooling of Pregnant Teens* (Luttrell, 2003), a book on an actual qualitative study, and preparing responses to those texts, I became knowledgeable of qualitative research methods. It was the actual fieldwork I performed to complete a small study, however, that enabled me to use and understand what qualitative research methods experts Robert Bogdan and Sari Biklen (2007) discuss in *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods*, a text designed especially for educators. I learned to observe and develop emerging questions, collect data in natural settings, analyze data inductively, develop themes, interpret the data, and present my findings in a written report. I was

excited to see how observations and interviews about real-world experiences of people could result in meaningful research data. It taught me a different way to study and understand phenomena.

As I continued to take courses, both Dr. Linda Spatig and Dr. Dennis Anderson encouraged me to pursue the Ed. D. degree. At the same time, I continued to reap the benefits of my bountiful garden harvest. I was not afraid to triple the size of my garden for the next growing season. But even after successfully completing five courses over a two-year period and receiving encouragement, I still did not have the confidence to take the required entrance exam for the Ed. D. program.

### **Germinating: Admission to the Ed. D. degree program**

Avoiding what I feared, I was in no rush to take the MAT or GRE; however, taking one of these tests became urgent. After enrolling in my sixth course, I learned there were no course offerings for the Ed. S. degree program in leadership studies for the 2012 spring semester. To continue taking doctoral coursework without interruption, I had to gain admission into the Ed. D. degree program for the 2012 spring semester. This required me to complete the admission application and take the MAT immediately. I was disappointed that I could not enroll in a course the following semester and felt rushed with the whole process of applying, but that did not stop me. My desire to continue to take courses and to ultimately achieve my goal of earning a doctorate degree was far greater than my fear of taking the MAT. So I decided to get my hands dirty and dig in.

I scurried to gather my credentials and prepared my educational purpose statement for the application and submitted them to the Graduate Admissions Office immediately. I also arranged to take the MAT on the next available testing date, which was about a week away. Fortunately, I

had an MAT practice booklet, which was given to me by Dr. Rudy Pauley, who had encouraged me to apply to the Ed. D. degree program a couple of years earlier. I was told by many persons that “you can’t study for the MAT;” nevertheless, I practiced as much as I could the days prior to the scheduled test. While practicing the MAT I missed many of the analogies, which increased my anxiety. I saw words on the practice tests that I had never seen before. What do I know about music, art, philosophy, and Greek mythology? I triple-majored in business, international business, and Polish as an undergraduate, earned a Master of Arts Degree in Human Services Administration, and have learned to garden, yet none of this learning seemed to help me know many of the vocabulary words I saw on the practice analogies for the MAT. I took the MAT and my worst fear came true. I did not obtain the required minimum score.

I have made many mistakes braving the elements in gardening and in other aspects of my life. I have learned from those mistakes and continued to work toward improvements. The same applied to my attempt in taking the MAT. Although I was severely jolted by not obtaining the minimum score, I did not remain discouraged very long. My husband, children, colleagues, and faculty provided me encouragement. Dr. Michael Cunningham, Dr. Dennis Anderson, and Dr. Teresa Eagle explained that this happens to a lot of students and recommended that I just take the appropriate time to practice and take the MAT again in the spring. Dr. Eagle also permitted me to register for the EDF 517 Statistical Methods course even though I knew that it would not count toward the Ed. S. degree. I was pleased to be able to do this because I did not want to take any breaks in my enrollment. Moreover, I was determined to be admitted into the doctoral program so I did not feel that there was any risk associated with taking this course. Dr. Eagle recommended a particular MAT practice booklet that I could use as well. I not only obtained the recommended MAT practice booklet, I also purchased two others. Undoubtedly, I had faith in

myself and others had faith in me. I was convinced that hard work, commitment, and dedication would enable me to obtain a successful score. I arranged to take the MAT again during the 2012 spring semester giving me several months to prepare.

Outside of my professional responsibilities, being a mom and a wife, and taking the EDF 517 Statistical Methods course, I pursued no other work besides preparing for the MAT. I gave up all leisure activities except for one – gardening. As I grew seedlings indoors and planned for my garden, I studied vocabulary and practiced for the MAT. I was just as ready to take the MAT as I was ready to plant my seedlings outdoors. I was fully confident that I would reap what I had sown. I felt mildly nervous when I took the MAT but nothing like the first time. I was ready and prepared. I was going to achieve the required score. But I did not. I scored even lower than the first time.

I did not cry as I had the first time when I did not reach the minimum MAT score but rather laughed out of disbelief. I was absolutely stunned. I thought maybe it was time to give up. I was angry and disappointed. Why could I not obtain the necessary score? How could a one-hour standardized test prevent me from achieving my life aspiration to earn a doctorate degree considering I had succeeded academically at all levels of my previous education?

I tried to find reasons why I did not obtain the minimum required MAT score. Feeling sorry for myself, I blamed my childhood disadvantages as the cause. My dad, a child of Polish immigrants, only completed school through the eighth grade and my mom, who lost her father in a coal mine when she was eleven years old, quit attending school in the sixth grade to help her mother raise several of her younger siblings. Indeed, growing up beneath the poverty level presented life challenges. As part of reflecting on the doctoral program for this portfolio paper, I encountered research findings that demonstrated a significant vocabulary gap between children

from the wealthiest and poorest families, which supports the conclusion that a major factor in the school failure of disadvantaged children is inadequate vocabulary knowledge (O'Hara & Pritchard, 2014; Fernald, Marchman, & Wesleder, 2013; Hart & Risley, 2003). In addition, studies have found that poverty plays a major role in depressing standardized test scores (Joyner, 2009; Orlich, & Gifford, 2005; Dahl & Lochner, 2005). Nevertheless, I reasoned with myself that at this stage in my life, my childhood disadvantages should no longer be a factor affecting my ability to obtain a reasonably high standardized test score. Further, my desire to academically and professionally succeed is far greater than my class-based obstacles.

I dismissed the idea of feeling victimized because of my disadvantaged background, stopped feeling sorry for myself, and came up with another explanation for not meeting the required minimum MAT score. It was because I am from the baby-boomer generation; hence, I was not conditioned to take a computerized test. I used books to practice the MAT, not the computer. I reasoned that if I could take the MAT by paper, I could obtain the minimum required score. After all, when I practiced the analogies with the MAT practice booklets I purchased, I scored in the 70<sup>th</sup>, 80<sup>th</sup>, and even the 90<sup>th</sup> percentiles. Unfortunately, the MAT was no longer available in paper format. The only alternative I had was to take the GRE by paper, but that would not be possible until fall, 2012. I did not want to wait six months to take the GRE so I arranged to take the MAT again – two weeks later.

I did nothing more to prepare for the MAT, but I continued to think intensely about what might be preventing me from obtaining the necessary score. Then a thought struck me the day before I was scheduled to take the MAT. I had just begun to use reading glasses for books and other printed materials, but not digital print. The computer screen at the test center was very small, maybe 19 inches, whereas my computer screens at the office and at home were about 25



inches. Perhaps I confused words in the analogies on the MAT because I had difficulty reading them on the smaller computer screen. So I decided to bring my reading glasses with me to take the MAT. I wore the reading glasses during the entire test. I finished. The score appeared. I scored 19 percentile points higher than my previous scores! I not only met the minimum score; I exceeded it.

Whether it was using a stake to support the tomato plant (wearing the reading glasses to correct my vision), growing plants on a trial-and-error basis (practice taking a computerized test two times), or sowing the seeds according to the *Farmer's Almanac Best Days for Planting* (taking the MAT the third time on that particular spring day), my seeds finally germinated. My official score was forwarded to the Graduate Admissions Office and I was immediately scheduled for an interview with the faculty of the Marshall University Doctoral Program in Education for consideration of admission. On April 26, 2012, the faculty of the Marshall University Doctoral Program in Education granted me admission to its program in Leadership Studies with an emphasis in Higher Education Administration.

### **Tending the seedlings: Select coursework**

As a neophyte gardener, I chose to grow vegetables – such as beans, cucumbers, lettuce, tomatoes, and summer squash – which do not require a lot of experience or skill to cultivate. I initially approached gardening in this way because I wanted to increase my chances of success. Likewise, because I have extensive experience as a higher education administrator, I thought taking mostly higher education leadership courses early in the program would be a prudent thing to do. As a gardener, however, I learned that even the easiest vegetable plants to grow are not totally foolproof. As a doctoral student, I also learned that the higher education leadership courses were not necessarily the easiest courses. The higher education leadership courses taught

by Dr. Dennis Anderson were rigorous, relevant, and useful for me as a higher education administrator. These hybrid courses (primarily online with limited class meetings) lacked the type of classroom collaboration I prefer – meet in-person and exchange scholarly learning and ideas. Nevertheless, they were designed in a way to prepare students for the realities of working in higher education administration. That is, they involved performing work independently.

LS 745, Higher Education Law, was a course I thought would not significantly contribute to my learning as a seasoned Director of Student Financial Assistance, which requires me to interpret and implement constantly changing federal and state financial aid regulations. But this was not the case. I developed skills in researching, citing, and understanding an array of higher education case laws well beyond the scope of my expertise working with financial aid regulations. Most importantly, I learned to understand the reasoning and rationale behind U.S. Supreme Court decisions and how to defend my analysis of those decisions. One project for this course that was particularly helpful was an assignment to prepare a paper on a legal issue supported by case law that affects higher education. I was charged with assessing two sides of a legal issue. Using the experience I gained reviewing case briefs and defending my analysis of the decisions of those cases and reviewing applicable literature, I prepared the paper, “The Evolution of FERPA: Student Privacy vs. Government Policy Goals.” (The LS 745 Legal Policy Analysis Paper is available at [www.kbialkdocportfolio.weebly.com](http://www.kbialkdocportfolio.weebly.com).) As a result of this coursework, I have an increased sensitization to legal issues affecting higher education. In addition, prior to this course my mode of working with rules and regulations was reactionary in nature. This has since changed. I continue to interpret and implement rules and regulations, but now I also critique them and argue my stance. Working collaboratively with professional colleagues, I have used this new skill during my formal participation as a member of the Midwest Association of Student

Financial Aid Administrators (MASFAA) Federal Issues Committee

(<http://www.masfaaweb.org/docs/committees/FedIssues/index.html>). One of the purposes of this committee is to influence the course of federal student aid policy and regulations by disseminating information and opinions to federal legislators.

Another beneficial higher education leadership course was LS 725 Higher Education Finance, a vital course for the success of any higher education leader. I learned to read and understand college and university financial statements by analyzing the quantitative data provided on financial statements of two postsecondary institutions of higher education and collecting qualitative data through interviews. In particular, this course required each student to prepare an analytical paper comparing the financial statements of a public postsecondary institution in West Virginia with a peer institution in another state and interviewing the chief financial officers of each of these institutions about their financial positions. (The LS 725 Higher Education Finance Comparative Analysis Report is available at [www.kbialkdocportfolio.weebly.com](http://www.kbialkdocportfolio.weebly.com).) This particular assignment strengthened and broadened my understanding of the financial functions and operations of colleges and universities. Interviewing the chief financial officers for purposes of this assignment also gave me the opportunity to practice qualitative inquiry, which added significant value to my learning and understanding of the financial statements and financial positions of these two institutions of higher education. My increased knowledge about higher education budgeting, financial statements, and financial operations, has enabled me to more capably contribute to the decision-making at my institution.

As I became a more skilled gardener and capable doctoral student, I embraced new challenges and experiences. Eggplants are very challenging to grow because they attract the flea

beetle; nevertheless, I remained determined to grow these deep purple vegetables each year even without the help of pesticides. I do this not only because eggplant is delicious, but because I enjoy the challenge of selecting a plant that is difficult to grow. Likewise, I was challenged and intrigued by taking the educational foundations, curriculum and instruction, theory, and research courses. I actually preferred them to some of the practical higher education leadership courses because they were new and different, challenged my way of thinking, broadened my views, and strengthened my ability to articulate my ideals and beliefs.

The most challenging, thought-provoking course I took was LS 707, Ethical Theory, taught by Dr. Bobbi Nicholson. Having absolutely no prior coursework in philosophy and a weak background in humanities, my learning curve to comprehend the ethical reasoning models of philosophers such as Plato, Immanuel Kant, and Friedrich Nietzsche was steep. As difficult as it was, I valued this learning and worked diligently to understand the various texts on moral philosophies. This course significantly improved my ability to apply ethical orientations to problem analysis and to articulate and argue my position on various situations and dilemmas. I am most proud of the final project I completed for this course, a paper and a presentation on the moral dimensions of public funding of higher education offering two theoretical frameworks, egalitarianism and neo-liberalism, to argue my position. Following the ideas of John Rawls (1999), who developed an influential and widely used theory of social justice, I argued that the public funding of higher education decisions must be tempered by egalitarian norms of justice and fairness. My argument follows an egalitarian belief in equal opportunities for all, especially those who are the most disadvantaged. (The LS 707 Ethical Theory Paper and Presentation are available at [www.kbialkdocportfolio.weebly.com](http://www.kbialkdocportfolio.weebly.com).)

Another intriguing and thought-provoking course was LS 705 Administrative Theory, also taught by Dr. Nicholson. In this course I practiced issue analysis and critical exploration applying the intellectual theories of functionalism, Marxism, critical theory, and feminism. As a final course assignment, I prepared a policy analysis of the 1972 Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA), explaining it from a functional perspective and then critiquing it from Marxist and critical theory perspectives. The provisions of the 1972 amendments of HEA epitomized the inclusive spirit of progressive policymaking for higher education for its time; however, the long-term effects of extending Title IV (federal) student aid to the for-profits diverged sharply from the intentions of policymakers. I argued from the Marxist and critical theory perspectives that the 1972 amendment to the HEA allowing for-profits to participate in Title IV (federal) student aid programs had established a norm that serves the interests of the privileged class, which was not the original intent of the HEA. (The LS 705 Administrative Theory Paper is available at [www.kbialkdocportfolio.weebly.com](http://www.kbialkdocportfolio.weebly.com).)

I was introduced briefly to differing theoretical approaches (e.g., interpretative, feminist, and postmodern) to research in the EDF 629 Mixed Methods Research course with Dr. Eric Lassiter. I was further exposed to conflict theories – Marxist, critical, feminist, and postmodern – in relation to research frameworks while I was concurrently enrolled in the EDF 626 Advanced Qualitative Research course with Dr. Linda Spatig. It was during this time realized as a researcher my methodological persuasions lean toward critical theory. I find critical theory appealing because it focuses on the oppression of the individual, the group, and society by self-imposed or externally imposed influences with the goal to emancipate and to expose social injustice (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Glesne, 2011; Hesse-Biber, 2010).

### **Flowering and Fruiting: Collaboration**

I was introduced to “servant leadership” in the LS 705 Administrative Theory course with Dr. Bobbi Nicholson. A servant leader focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong (Greenleaf, 2002). Dr. Stephen R. Covey, the author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, explains that a servant leader is one who seeks to draw out, inspire, and develop the best and highest within people from the inside out by engaging the people in a process that creates a shared vision; the servant leader inspires individuals to stretch and reach deeper within themselves and to use everyone’s unique talents in whatever way is necessary to independently and interdependently achieve that shared vision (Greenleaf, 2002).

I believe servant leadership can only be achieved through collaboration. According to the *Merriam-Webster On-line Dictionary* (2014), the definition of collaboration is “the work and activity of a number of persons who individually contribute toward the efficiency of the whole.” As I learned from Grahn (2011), the *Three Sisters Garden* is an analogy for servant leadership based on collaboration. The *Three Sisters Garden* – including corn, beans, and squash – is an example of a highly efficient and effective combination of different plants that grow together and thrive (Formiga, 2013). Just as the corn, beans, and squash help one another grow and thrive, so do individuals when they collaborate.

The portfolio activities presented below can be described as the highly efficient and effective combination of different plants that have borne fruit in my garden. As a doctoral student, I worked collaboratively with fellow students, faculty, and professional colleagues performing professional service, publishing, conducting research, preparing presentations, and co-teaching a course. The results of this collaboration present evidence of my commitment to the

principles of servant leadership, which include listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Greenleaf, 2002). They also demonstrate my growth and development as a doctoral student.

### **Professional Service**

In the fall of 2012, the LS 719 Intro to Doctoral Studies course and the sessions at my first Doctoral Faculty/Student Seminar provided me an overview of the tasks and processes involved in the completion of the doctoral requirements. I learned that the planning for the doctoral seminar is done through collaborative committee work between faculty and students. As a doctoral student, I benefited from participating in the doctoral seminar. Because I was inspired by the work of all the faculty and students involved in presenting and facilitating the doctoral seminar sessions and I wanted to get to know more faculty and students, I joined the 2013 Doctoral Faculty/Student Seminar Planning Committee. My service on the committee providing input quickly turned into a leadership role. I volunteered to serve as chair of the sub-committee for facilitating the creation, planning, and implementation of the doctoral seminar sessions. A major part of my responsibility was to listen to the needs of the doctoral students and desires of the faculty, acquire session descriptions from faculty presenters, and introduce faculty to their doctoral student moderators. (Refer to the Thank You Letter to Bialk from Dr. Edna Meisel at [www.kbialkdocportfolio.weebly.com](http://www.kbialkdocportfolio.weebly.com).)

In addition, I am committed to serve my professional associations at the state, regional, and national levels. I have always appreciated the wealth of information, mentoring, and inspiration I received over the years from my colleagues in the financial aid profession so I continue to collaborate with professional colleagues to give back what was given to me. While a

doctoral student, I served as the 2012-2013 West Virginia Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (WVASFAA) Spring Conference Program Chair and member of both the 2013-2014 MASFAA Conference Program and Federal Issues Committees. I am currently serving as the 2014-2015 President-elect of WVASFAA and I will become the 2015-2016 President.

### **Publication**

My first opportunity for scholarship came when I enrolled in CI 677 Writing for Publication with Dr. Eric Lassiter. This course taught me how to write a scholarly article, select an appropriate book for review, find a journal with an audience appropriate for my scholarly review, work with a journal editor (and start all over again with a new editor after the former retired), and persuade the editor to accept book reviews although the journal historically had only published research articles.

During this class I wrote a book review of *The Art and Science of Student Administration in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* by Joseph A. Russo (2010). Following several revisions based on fellow-students' and Dr. Lassiter's feedback, I submitted my manuscript to the *Journal of Student Financial Aid* for consideration of publication. I am proud to say that my scholarly article, *Book Review: The Art and Science of Student Aid Administration in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Bialk, 2012) was selected for publication in the journal's first issue of 2012. (This publication is available at <http://publications.nasfaa.org/jsfa/vol42/iss1/4/> or at [www.kbialkdocportfolio.weebly.com](http://www.kbialkdocportfolio.weebly.com).)

The experience of learning to write a scholarly piece and ultimately having it published was both exhilarating and empowering. It was a valuable lesson in writing, scholarship, and collaboration. Also, it was a test of perseverance and tenacity. Nick Hillman, Associate Editor (and Assistant Professor, Educational Leadership & Policy, University of Utah) thanked me for being a "trailblazer" in the quest for the *Journal of Student Financial Aid* to establish book



review publication policy and procedures and to be the first to have a book review article published in the journal (Hillman Email Memorandum to Bialk, January 5, 2012).

### **Research**

A new course, CI 627 Program Planning and Evaluation, was scheduled for the 2013 spring semester. It was announced along with the details of a new graduate certificate program in program evaluation. The certificate program was described as “a program that emphasizes the practical application of program planning, assessment, and evaluation through frames of mixed methods research, local cultural contexts, and project-based applications of skills and knowledge” (Email Memorandum from Edna Thomas on behalf of Dr. Eric Lassiter to the Ed. D. student list-serve, September 26, 2012). In my job I am frequently put into an evaluation role, but I had not ever received any formal evaluation training. I thought the course was perfect for meeting my professional needs so I enrolled in it as an elective.

The CI 627 Program Planning and Evaluation course provided me a basic understanding of program planning and evaluation. Using Davidson’s (2005) *Evaluation Methodology Basics: The Nuts and Bolts of Sound Evaluation* text and performing course-specific exercises, I learned “evaluation-specific logic and methodology.” Davidson’s (2005) step-by-step approach includes 1) defining the purpose of the evaluation; 2) identifying the evaluative criteria using needs assessment; 3) organizing the criteria and choosing sources of evidence, i.e., mixed-method data; 4) dealing with the issue of causation by distinguishing between outcomes or effects and coincidental changes not caused by the program or policy; 5) understanding which values should be applied in an evaluation; 6) weighting the importance and determining the merit of criteria; 7) systematically condensing evaluative findings; 8) putting it all together in a report; and 9) evaluating the evaluation.

Realizing the benefits of conducting formal evaluation, by the end of the course I had decided that “program evaluation” would be my area of emphasis. Additional courses supporting my program emphasis interest include EDF 620 Mixed Methods Research and LS 780 Special Topics. Selecting program evaluation as my area of emphasis developed into a valuable opportunity to learn, research, and collaborate. Using my educational background in program evaluation and my experience in higher education administration, I plan to explore the opportunity to work as a program evaluation consultant.

Dr. Spatig, discovering my area of emphasis interest, invited me to participate in a mixed-methods evaluation study for the West Virginia Maternal Infant Health Outreach (MIHOW) program. I eagerly accepted the offer and since January, 2013, have been one of four doctoral qualitative research assistants led by Dr. Spatig, studying the West Virginia MIHOW program. My three other fellow-doctoral student qualitative researcher collaborators include Debra Conner-Lockwood, Amy Carlson, and Kelli Kerbawy.

The MIHOW program is a parent-to-parent intervention that targets economically disadvantaged and geographically or socially isolated families with children from birth to age three to improve health and child development among these families (Vanderbilt University Medical Center, 2012). The purpose of the qualitative component of the West Virginia MIHOW research is to understand how the program is experienced and perceived by the moms and the home visitors. The goal is to provide qualitative research findings that will be helpful to program designers and implementers in efforts to make the program as effective as possible (Spatig, Conner-Lockwood, Carlson, Bialk, & Kerbawy, 2013).

The qualitative research team meets in-person once a month in addition to working collaboratively through email communication. Using guidance from Glesne’s (2011) *Becoming*

*Qualitative Researchers* text, we have developed a series of interview guides for both moms and home visitors. At this time, there are three interview guides for the moms and two for the home visitors. Currently, our sample size for this qualitative study is 24, 19 moms and five home visitors. Our goal is to interview each mom three times and each home visitor twice.

Our primary data collection strategy is the individual phone interview. Each interview is audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Following the interview, the qualitative research assistant who conducted it writes observer comments on the interview transcripts. In preparation for our monthly in-person meetings, we read one another's transcripts. The interviews are further discussed during our meetings. Separately and collectively we perform inductive content data analysis by assigning code words (Biklen & Bogdan, 2007). These codes have enabled us to develop themes that describe the experiences of the MIHOW participants. During the second year of the study, we found evidence of four themes: 1) providing services that are simultaneously uniform and customized, 2) learning on the part of mothers, home visitors, and children, 3) forging connections – between moms and home visitors as well as between moms and community resources, and 4) empowering or strengthening moms (Spatig et al., 2013). More recently, during the first half of the third year of the study, we began to see evidence of irregular, infrequent visits, which made it difficult to get much information about some of the moms' experiences with the MIHOW program.

In addition to gathering data and performing data analysis, we disseminated our findings in a West Virginia MIHOW Qualitative Research Report: Year Two (see at [www.kbialkdocportfolio.weebly.com](http://www.kbialkdocportfolio.weebly.com)) and presented the results of the second year of study at the 2014 Appalachian Studies Association Annual Conference – a refereed, national meeting. Also, as part of my requirements for the LS 780 Special Topics: Study of Rural Appalachian Women

course, collaborating with Dr. Spatig, we plan to author an article for publication that draws on the extant MIHOW data and on my literature review on rural Appalachian women, and their aspirations for family, education, and employment.

My experience working collaboratively on the West Virginia MIHOW program evaluation research team has been invaluable. I have strengthened my skills in collecting data and performing data analysis. I have learned how to develop both research and interview questions, and to modify them as findings emerge. I have also become much more proficient with my interviewing skills by avoiding asking leading questions and instead asking probing questions that “make words fly” (Glesne, p. 102) and illuminate participants’ lived experiences (Maxwell, 2013; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

The research-related courses – LS 703 Research Design, EDF 711 Survey Research in Education, EDF 517 Statistical Methods, EDF 625 Qualitative Research, EDF 626 Advanced Qualitative Research, EDF 629 Mixed-Methods Research – and my experience as a research assistant for the West Virginia MIHOW program evaluation study have provided me the necessary theoretical and practical knowledge to conduct independent research. Moreover, I have learned that conducting research requires perseverance and determination, which I have demonstrated as a doctoral student and throughout my work as a qualitative research assistant for the West Virginia MIHOW program. I am confident that my research knowledge and acquired experience and skills will serve me well when I embark on the dissertation process.

### **Presentations**

Collaborative presentations provide opportunities to share scholarly experiences, new knowledge, and different perspectives. The first scholarship opportunity to co-present with Marshall University faculty at a regional or national conference came as a result of my

involvement as a qualitative research assistant for the West Virginia MIHOW program. Dr. Linda Spatig, Debra Conner-Lockwood, Amy Carlson, Kelli Kerbawy, and I, along with the quantitative research team – Dr. Marty Amerikaner, Dr. Chris LeGrow, and Dr. Stephen O’Keefe – presented “Studying the Maternal Infant Health Outreach Worker Program: A Multi-site, Mixed-Methods Randomized Control Trial Program Evaluation in Rural West Virginia” at the 2014 Appalachian Studies Association (ASA) Annual Conference in Huntington, WV. (The abstract of this presentation is located at [http://mds.marshall.edu/asa\\_conference/2014/Full/280/](http://mds.marshall.edu/asa_conference/2014/Full/280/) or is available at [www.kbalkdocportfolio.weebly.com](http://www.kbalkdocportfolio.weebly.com).)

Another opportunity to co-present with Marshall University faculty resulted from an invitation from Dr. Lassiter to present a “Writing for Publication” session with fellow-doctoral students, Rikki Lowe and Harley Walden, at the 2014 Marshall University Doctoral Faculty/Student Seminar in which we will discuss our experiences with publishing our work in academic journals, describing our struggles with writing, working with journal editors, going through the editing process, and undergoing the final publication process.

In addition to collaborating with Marshall University faculty to submit proposals for presentation, I sought opportunities to present with other higher education professionals at the regional and national level from different states, higher education sectors, and positions, to serve my profession. These opportunities not only enhanced my skills in collaboration; they also strengthened my communication and leadership skills. (An itemization of these presentations with details is available at [www.kbalkdocportfolio.weebly.com](http://www.kbalkdocportfolio.weebly.com).)

### **Co-Teaching**

I was excited to learn that CI 677 Writing for Publication by Dr. Lassiter was being offered the 2014 spring semester because that was the semester I had planned to co-teach with

faculty in order to meet one of my portfolio requirements. I was even more thrilled that Dr. Lassiter agreed to allow me to co-teach this course with him considering he was one of the most effective teachers I had experienced as a doctoral student.

Along with my research experience working closely with Dr. Spatig, my experience co-teaching with Dr. Lassiter has been one of the most beneficial portfolio experiences I have encountered in the doctoral program. (Refer to the Thank You Letter to Bialk from Dr. Eric Lassiter at [www.kbialkdocportfolio.weebly.com](http://www.kbialkdocportfolio.weebly.com).) I entered my role of a co-teacher as one who was insecure of her abilities to teach considering that I had never taught before. As Dr. Lassiter did when I was a student in the CI 677 Writing for Publication course, he put me at ease. Right from the start Dr. Lassiter positioned me as a co-professor, a professional, who would teach by facilitating collaborative learning.

Just as a gardener, I took responsibility as an educator for the development of each plant/student according to specific individualized needs. During our teaching collaboration I learned how to give feedback verbally in classroom group settings, in teacher-student workshop conference style sessions, and by communicating in writing to students individually.

The most challenging aspect of my teaching experience was to critique my fellow-doctoral students' works of writing. I believe Dr. Lassiter trusted my ability to do this more than I trusted myself. I believed the best thing I could do for students who wanted to learn and to improve was to provide feedback by critiquing, offering suggestions, and most importantly giving encouragement to empower them to succeed. Another very important lesson I learned about teaching is that collaboration invites participation through intellectual engagement and lived experiences. For example, it is just as important to understand and reflect upon personal struggles with writing and to collectively share these experiences as it is to go through the

process of writing. I enjoy learning so it was a positive experience for me to help others learn; it was through this experience, I know for certain, that I decided to pursue the possibility of teaching at the collegiate level.

### **Harvesting: Conclusion**

My garden of coursework, collaboration, scholarship, and research is ready for harvest. The fruits of my labor demonstrate what I have become as a student, a researcher, educator, and leader. The experiences I have highlighted are only a few examples of how the doctoral program in higher education leadership studies has prepared me for the next growing cycle. My courses and portfolio experiences have prepared me to embark upon the dissertation process, and they have broadened my understanding of who I am as a leader as well.

The gardener, an image of me as a doctoral student in higher education leadership, follows the servant leadership concept as it focuses on the growth of the leader and those she serves. Robert K. Greenleaf's (2002) servant leadership philosophy keenly resonates with me because it emulates the characteristics of a leader that I value:

The servant-leader is servant first. . . . The servant-first makes sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived? Becoming a servant-leader begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is a leader first. The difference manifests itself in the care

taken by the servant first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served (p. 27).

Further, I would argue that the values of servant leadership have the underpinnings of Marxism and critical theory. As I learned in Dr. Nicholson's LS 705 Administrative Theory, Dr. Spatig's LS 626 Advanced Qualitative Research, and Dr. Lassiter's EDF 629 Mixed Methods Research courses, critical theory is a form of self-reflective knowledge involving both understanding and theoretical explanation that aims to reduce entrapment in systems of domination or dependence. Synonymous with Greenleaf's servant leadership best test, critical theory provides the descriptive and normative bases for social inquiry aimed at decreasing domination and increasing freedom in all their forms.

Although accomplishments can be achieved by a single person, greater accomplishments are achieved when leaders foster collaboration, which enables servants to strengthen one another. As a doctoral student, I have been inspired and challenged by those who have led me, which in turn has ignited my passion to help others have successful achievements and growth. I shall continue to carry out the values of servant leadership in my role as a higher education administrator and in my future roles as an educator and program evaluator.

I look forward to the next growing season during which I will embark upon my dissertation. My plans are to continue the research work I have been doing with the West Virginia MIHOW program. My tentative research proposal is to understand factors that are responsible for enabling and restricting rural Appalachian women in achieving life aspirations in the key areas of family, education, and employment. I plan to incorporate the critical theory framework to my research interest because according to Lassiter (2005), critical theory applied to ethnographic research emphasizes a more fully and critically conscious approach to the power



relations inherent in all ethnography. In addition, Glesne (2007) argues that feminist theory has the underlying assumption that women experience oppression and exploitation; hence, my critical theory approach will be guided by feminist theory as well. Feminist theory aligns with critical theory in that both focus on issues of justice and power and are committed to understanding forces that cause, sustain, and challenge oppression (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Glesne, 2011; Hesse-Biber, 2010; Lassiter, 2005).

The focus of my proposed study is important to me because I know first-hand that education is a social and economic equalizer. More broadly, the proposed study's findings may be valuable for other individual women and the communities in which they live, and for higher education leaders, educators, and policy-makers.

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