

A University as the Center of Change: Preparing Educational Activists and Change Leaders

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ABSTRACT

The East Carolina University International EdD supports school leaders in the United States and across the globe to address local educational equity challenges. To achieve this, we prepare and support school and district leaders to use evidence as practitioner-researchers together with members of their educational community. As a result, the reimagined EdD harnesses the power and utility of participatory action and activist research to address a contextualized, equity-focused dissertation in practice. We explore how two doctoral students have transformed their practices during and after their EdD experience.

KEYWORDS

program design, dissertation in practice, equity, participatory action research, student voice

"Every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets," so says the adage widely attributed to W. Edwards Deming and used in the business world, with clear applications to education. The words are prophetic: continuing the same types of educational leadership programs is bound to yield school or district leaders ill-equipped for 21st century schools. At the turn of the century, scholars were critical of school leader preparation programs; Levine (2005) challenged institutions of higher learning to employ improved methods to prepare school and district leaders. The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) responded by engaging universities in an effort to reimagine preparation through a re-calibrated educational doctoral experience. CPED did not envision a single solution to improve leadership programs. Rather, CPED engaged participating programs to utilize a common set of principles to guide diverse program redesigns (Perry, 2013).

Along with colleagues at other CPED universities, the East Carolina University EdD faculty reimagined its educational doctoral programs (Militello et al., 2020). This article describes one of the ECU designs, the ECU International EdD program, which supports school leaders in the U.S. and across the globe to address the equity challenges they confront in their local contexts (Militello & Tredway, 2020; Militello et al., 2020). Our overarching question throughout the

re-design process has been: How can an EdD program prepare and support school and district leaders to use evidence as practitioner-researchers? We wanted graduates to change the ways they inhabit the role of school or district leaders and become, as Spillane and Coldren (2011) note, diagnosticians and designers who use iterative evidence as a way of being educational leaders.

As we describe in this article, program graduates become not only action practitioner-researchers but activists who support "collective action to challenge the many forms of social injustice" (hunter et al., 2013, p. 7). Our goal is to prepare school and district leaders to systematically use the EdD learning experience to sustain practices that interrupt the typical school reform narrative by fostering ways for becoming activist educational leaders. Using innovative curricular and pedagogical approaches, we incorporate several key design elements in the reimagined ECU EdD and, more importantly, want these elements to transfer to their ongoing school reform work (Militello et al., 2019).

At the heart of the program design, the EdD program has spearheaded an effort to use participatory action research (PAR) as a vehicle to address equity challenges that crop up in participants' contexts (see education.ecu.edu/IntEdD) – what hunter and



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colleagues (2013) term PAR or participatory activist research, a more explicit form of action research. The PAR is a process we use for the dissertation, but more significantly, *the PAR represents an ongoing cycle of inquiry process we want graduates to use as they take on the roles of practitioner-researchers within their schools and districts*. Each candidate's PAR specifically includes the inclusion of school or district constituents (teachers, other administrators, and/or students and families) as co-practitioner-researchers (CPR). The dissertation focuses on an equity challenge and the student, along with the CPR group, uses iterative qualitative evidence for decision-making (Spillane & Coldren 2011).

In this article, we describe the *reimagined* ECU EdD and share two stories of activism. First, we explore the program design, in which we fused a trio of frameworks that concurrently provide pedagogical direction – community learning exchange axioms, design thinking, and improvement science– to fully enact the CPED principles and PAR principles of activist research. Next, through two vignettes, we explore how doctoral students have transformed their practices during and after their EdD. experience. Specifically, we analyze two students' accounts of activism as change agents in their school communities. We conclude with our premise that the university has a moral responsibility to prepare leaders who are practitioner-researchers who advocate for social justice. These questions guide our programmatic design and continuing inquiry for improving: *What does a dissertation in practice look like for a practitioner-researcher committed to activism? How does a program support this kind of action research in its inception, pedagogy, and structures to guide the development of educational leaders as practitioner-researchers? And, most importantly, how does a program prepare practitioner-researchers to engage in activist research and practice beyond the completion of the program?*

PROGRAM DESIGN: THE REIMAGINED EdD

Earning a doctorate in educational administration is a journey, and, while it is an individual journey of learning for every person, no doctoral candidate should be on a solo trek. While the research is relatively scant, estimates of doctoral completion indicate low completion rates (Most, 2009; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Tinto, 1993; Van der Haert, et al., 2014; Zwick, 1991). Estimates indicate that fewer than 40% of the educators who begin the EdD obtain their degrees within seven years of beginning their programs. Participant variables such as financial barriers, opportunity costs, intellectual capacity, and participant choice are most frequently cited explanations (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Gardner, 2009; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988). We designed an EdD to support completion by focusing on a cohort model, partnering doctoral students with faculty holding a strategic advisor role, and modeling PAR cycles of inquiry and a particular set of pedagogies. The cohort model turns the typical individual journey into a network of equity-focused school leaders who garner support from each other to disrupt and reinvent (Theoharis, 2009; Theoharis, 2010). Because the EdD faculty and advisors aim to walk the talk by modeling the pedagogies we expect students to use as school and district leaders, we consistently reinforce the importance of the collective and reciprocal responsibility for staying on track for completion (Militello & Tredway, 2020; Militello et al., 2019). Equally important to programmatic success is a common methodological approach. The PAR methodology is supported by the research coursework and the ability to share tools and processes for data collection and analysis

(Hale, 2008; hunter et al. , 2013; Saldaña, 2016). While our program design cannot protect candidates from every factor a doctoral candidate might experience – such as financial barriers, health concerns, or opportunity costs – it aims to mitigate as many variables as possible.

The purpose of each EdD dissertation is the same: *To improve the practices of school and district leaders in service of the goal of equitable student outcomes*. Through a distributed leadership perspective, use of evidence-based practices, and a focus on culturally responsive leadership for equity, we advocate for leadership as a function in the school, while fully recognizing that school and district leaders must simultaneously be the linchpins of facilitating substantive and equitable reform efforts (Rigby & Tredway, 2015; Khalifa, 2019; Spillane et al., 2001; Spillane & Diamond, 2007). Because the EdD prepares practitioner-researchers to organize and facilitate collaborative teams to address equity issues in their school or district contexts, each EdD cohort operates as a collaborative group with advisors who maintain regular contact with candidates. Advisors visit all doctoral students (cohort number=14-20) during the first year of the program, become familiar with the local contexts of the students, and calibrate the research design to the context.

To serve the dual goals of ensuring rigor and supporting professionals to complete in three years, we organized the program with a single methodology: Participatory Action Research (PAR). The PAR methodology we use has a strong focus on action as activism with a focus on equitable outcomes. The actions of an EdD candidate as practitioner-researcher relies on systematic analysis of iterative evidence that requires frequent diagnosing and designing toward the ultimate improvement goals (Gawande, 2017; Saldaña, 2016; Spillane, 2009; Spillane & Coldren, 2011). Along with ongoing content courses that support deeper knowledge and understandings of equity, teaching and learning, history of education, organizational theory, and policy, design courses each semester promote ongoing movement toward completing the dissertation using qualitative methodologies required for PAR work. Because the PAR process is deeply embedded into students' course experience each semester, the common methodology supports completion of projects within normative timelines. Yet, far from a tool for efficiency alone, the design aims to promote excellence. It is a methodological approach that can be incorporated as an ongoing best practice for social justice leaders, cementing their commitment to engagement and collaboration and fueling meaningful, sustainable change.

Thus, participatory action research is threaded through the entire program, resulting in a seven chapter dissertation: Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Context/Pre-Cycle, PAR Cycle One, PAR Cycle Two, and Conclusion. In this way, the students build a dissertation chapter by chapter, semester by semester, throughout the program. The PAR design was influenced by improvement science, specifically the process of Plan Do Study Act cycles. However, our PAR design cycles add fluid engagement by the co-practitioner research partners (CPR), whose voice and insights help shape the direction of the work. This engagement and collaboration provide a dynamic influence on the study and solidifies the activist principles that anchors this work.

In support of these functional design elements, the program is grounded in a set of critical foundational principles, frameworks, and pedagogical approaches that model activist research principles and buttress programmatic outcomes: equity focus, community learning exchange axioms, design thinking principles, and improvement

science. The frameworks direct our design, pedagogy, engagement with students, participatory action research (dissertation), and most importantly, graduate student learning. The nature of researchers as activists is bolstered by the content and methods courses of the program that stress a set of equity principles for the coursework on policy, teaching and learning, history and sociology of education, change theory, and methodology courses that underscore activist research principles (Eubanks et al., 1997; Freire, 1997; Gutiérrez, 2013; Hale, 2008; Hale, 2001; hunter et al., 2013; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; Mills, 1997).

We are focused on how doctoral candidates can learn to successfully disrupt current practices as intentional social justice advocates (Khalifa, 2019; Theoharis, 2009). Informed by the principles of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (Perry, 2013), the aim of all CPED programs is to differentiate the EdD from the PhD by designing the education doctorate for educational practitioners. Through a robust admission process, that included a personal interview and group engagement day, we choose school leaders who want a program that specifically addresses equity and social justice as core values. The principles have set a standard for programs, like ours, that are seeking to be more learner-centered and focused on developing educators seeking to stay in school or district leadership positions. To actualize this vision in practice, we draw on three guiding frameworks and processes: *Community Learning Exchange*, *design thinking*, and *improvement science tailored to an equity focus*.

Community Learning Exchange

Community Learning Exchanges offers not only a systematic framework, but an engaging approach to learning as well as a research methodology (Guajardo et al., 2016). Exchange is the operative word as we design all experiences and methodologies to follow the attributes of experiential education: interaction, reciprocity, and continuity (Dewey, 1938). Built on the core value that any genuine improvement effort must first honor the importance of place and the wisdom of local people, our program devotes time to investigating place and people in the very context which students seek to improve. To prepare students to embark on that work within their own settings, we thoroughly embed the Community Learning Exchange (CLE) axioms in our approaches to pedagogy and research methodology:

1. Learning and leadership are dynamic social processes.
2. Conversations are critical and central pedagogical processes.
3. The people closest to the issues are best situated to address local concerns.
4. Crossing boundaries enriches developmental and educational processes.
5. Hope and change are built on assets and dreams of local persons and their communities (Guajardo et al., 2016).

The protocols include rituals and routines from CLE work since its inception in the early 2000s and additional processes we have designed. The processes include, for example, gracious space, journey lines, opening and closing circles, and world café (Guajardo et al., 2016; see examples of pedagogy on iel.org/protocols). Our pedagogical approach reflect our belief in dialogical education as an imperative for advancing social justice and the value of the arts as an

integrative and integral part of learning, all of which we have translated to online learning (Milittle et al., 2019). The approaches include small group and large group protocols built on a foundation of equitable academic discourse in person and on virtual platforms, including learning walks, Socratic seminars, writing workshops, and cooperative learning strategies used in K-12 classrooms (Kagan, 2013; Tredway, 1995; Zwiars & Crawford, 2011).

Previously proven powerful in community engagement (Guajardo, et al., 2016; Milittle et al., 2019), Community Learning Exchanges are inherently aligned with an activist approach in their explicit focus on uplifting community brilliance to empower local decision-making. They are a natural complement to participatory action research, which “at its broadest, works with a community on a common topic of interest, that is, engaging the community in finding answers and applying those answers to a point of concern” (hunter et al., 2013, p. 17). The CLE axioms create the conditions by which doctoral students can engage in purposeful data collection strategies specifically focused on connecting with often marginalized voices (e.g., PhotoVoice, digital storytelling, and story mapping). This does not always come easily. Our national obsession with norm-referenced, standardized test scores has shifted the conception many entering doctoral students have of what we even mean by data. In the EdD, we work to deconstruct this misconception in action, leading students from their very first week in experiencing data collection and analysis “the CLE way.” Soon after meeting their new cohort-mates, students embark on an experiential data collection journey: conducting a community map of their new environment and then working together to code the evidence gathered. This exposure to data collection and analysis repeats often throughout the first year, supporting students as they begin to design their own research and seek IRB approval for a variety of data collection protocols.

Yet, perhaps nowhere is the alignment between the CLE axioms and PAR clearer than in the EdD program’s integration of *co-practitioner-researchers* (CPR groups) – local organizational actors who can join students’ research efforts in a similar way we hope the school leaders in our program will organize their future schools, utilizing distributed leadership structures such as instructional leadership teams and professional learning communities (Milittle & Tredway, 2020). Early on in the dissertation design process, each EdD student partners with other local constituents that may include educators, parents, students, and/or community members as partners in the improvement effort. These individuals become their local co-researchers for the duration of the project. This allows doctoral students to translate the early and consistent exposure to CLE pedagogies and axioms they themselves experienced as an EdD cohort into lived practice within their individual contexts. In so doing, they gain facility with an approach to authentic engagement capable of leveraging the assets and insights of diverse constituents in service of a shared goal. In our experience, this can seem revolutionary to school leaders, especially those without a pre-existing activist identity. As such, we layer the foundational work of community building and organizing with the principles of design thinking to support students in thinking boldly and creatively about how to bring about markedly different outcomes for systemically underserved students.



Design Thinking

Like the CLE process, the design thinking process offers leaders the possibility of engaging in the sort of creative problem-solving that is useful specifically for doctoral research, but more importantly as a way forward for use in K-12 environments (Nash, 2019). Gallagher and Thordarson (2018) posit that “[d]esign-driven leadership offers opportunities for moments of impact, often unscripted and unplanned but still intentional, and the [development of] mindsets are what help [leaders] learn to identify these opportunities” (p. 6). Akin to the change theory of McDonald (1996), design thinking offers an intentional process for creating epiphany moments termed sightings that can help determine a creative way forward. Design thinking is particularly useful for complex problems that have multiple components and no easy solution. The emphasis on human-centered design principles privileges processes that attend deeply to the relational component of change work. As such, the approach aligns with the goals of 21st century education, in which a previous focus on traditional technical/rational problem-solving has given way to a need to enact systems that facilitate collective coordinated action on the part of leaders, teachers, students, parents and community partners (Nash, 2019).

A second critical design thinking component is becoming comfortable with divergent thinking. $A + B$ does not always = C . Instead, educational leaders have to develop the disposition of flexibility by keeping in mind the ultimate goal while they experiment and inquire; they do not let go of the long-term “what” or “why” but are flexible in the short-term about the “how”. Design thinking requires that leaders shift the focus from needs assessment to asset mining, from strategic long-term planning to short-term use of iterative evidence to diagnose and design, and from top-down to flattened hierarchy. As Spillane (2009) reminds us:

Diagnostic work is not an end in itself; it is, sometimes more than others, the basis for design and redesign work. Design is an everyday activity in schools as leaders attempt to shape aspects of their organizational infrastructure to meet new ends... [E]xternal designs can help, but they cannot substitute entirely for local diagnostic and design work. Hence, developing a diagnostic and design mindset is critical to improvement (pp. 17 and 19).

For our doctoral students, this concept of diagnose and design starts with empathy interviews to understand how all constituents think and feel about a proposed direction and proceeds to modest experiments or probes. A brief explanation of empathy interviews might be helpful. The results of this early experimentation lead to the design and testing of prototypes, similar to the Plan Do Study Act cycles of improvement science. These processes intentionally mirror what is required for durable and substantial change: daily and iterative evidence-informed decisions that schools make, not the strategic plan that sits on the principal’s shelf and is more compliance-oriented than reality-tested (Plattner, n.d.). They do so incrementally and with multiple opportunities to stop, analyze, reflect and respond, in this way creating new space for students to become researchers by increasing their confidence in trying bold new things and making mistakes. The EdD programmatic focus of design thinking reinforces how leaders re-imagine interactions with others, cultivates the knowledge and skills to use more accessible processes for gathering and analyzing evidence, fosters more flexible and fluid processes and decision-making, and supports the doctoral students to be risk-takers. Our inclusion of design thinking is nested in improvement science anchored with relational trust.

Improvement Science: Re-emphasizing Relational Trust

Bryk et al. (2015) at the Carnegie Project for the Advancement of Teaching have committed to a school reform effort they term *improvement science*. The improvement science approach seeks to mitigate the 6% problem whereby only a small percentage of improvement efforts show results (Bryk, 2017). We found the improvement science framework to be useful and accessible to the work of educators in schools because it supports educators to engage deeply in cycles of inquiry in a familiar context; as a result, they can gather a team of persons to address a focus of practice. However, we found improvement science alone lacks a person-centered approach.

Yet, while Bryk and colleagues (2010) acknowledge relational trust as a precondition for improvement, we make the linkage between improvement science and relational trust more explicit in the EdD program of study and student experiences (Bryk, 2015; Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Additionally, because all projects are focused on a local issue of equity, focusing on a learning climate of equitable access for student engagement was more useful to our work (Allensworth & Hart, 2018; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2019). We note that neither framework clearly defines nor makes use of the culturally responsive pedagogy that we see as critical elements of a strong EdD program committed to equitable outcomes.

The improvement science framework and tools inform coursework and the dissertation design. The framework focuses on metrics of practice and collaboration, and the iterative collection of evidence in short cycles of inquiry intersects with the emphasis on our attention to diagnose and design cycles (Spillane, 2009). The framework supports divergent thinking and the importance of leaders paying attention to changes in the dynamic organizational structure in which they work. As well, we are committed to more deeply engaging graduate students in forming communities of practice, termed networked improvement communities (NICs) in the Carnegie parlance, and using the funds of knowledge that those communities can bring to reform work (Lave & Wegner, 1991; Moll et al., 1992). However, as we discuss next, we found that we needed to shift some language to strengthen the relational trust necessary to engage in this work. We do so by honoring the context of place and wisdom of people.

Community Learning Exchange + Design Thinking + Improvement Science = Reimagined EdD

Context matters, especially a school context that is nested in institutional, community, economic, and historical contexts. This “recognition of the role and limitations of research-based knowledge liberates school leaders to move in the direction of reflective practice that honors theory, research-based evidence and the wisdom of practice” (Hallinger, 2018, p. 19). Combining the community learning exchange with design thinking and the improvement science frameworks addresses the overarching principles of equity and justice to which the program is committed. We are set on the process of developing a critical consciousness about issues of equity as fundamental to deeply interrupting current practices in school reform that have not produced results for the most vulnerable students. As an ongoing practice, design thinking is critical for the iterative processes in which the leaders engage others to become activist researchers. First of all, design thinking requires doctoral students to

“think out of the school reform box” by engaging them in individual and group activities that push their ability to empathize, observe, inquire, and remold ideas of what is possible for social transformation, not social reproduction.

The community learning exchange framework helped us reconsider the improvement science framework and practices and change the approach from technical to cultural and relational and from naming what is absent or faulty in a school or district to using the assets to support forward movement. For example, relational trust has long been known to be a substantial factor in school reform and is named a primary abstract resource of school change (Bryk, 2015; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Grubb, 2009), but, for us, is not sufficiently stressed in the improvement science framework. However, three areas of the improvement science framework offered substantial start to our thinking. First, we shifted the term *problem of practice* to *focus of practice* because we want to ensure that we operate from an asset base rather than the traditional needs analysis that too often fosters deficit thinking. Second, we wanted to ensure that doctoral students investigate with their co-practitioners the particular assets as well as challenges or needs that help them diagnose and address their dissertation focus of practice. Thus, Rosenthal (2019) developed a revised fishbone that included the micro, meso (organizational) and macro (systemic) levels of assets and challenges all influence the participatory action research; she shared that with instructors and her cohort, and that design has become the vehicle for inquiring about the focus of practice. Third, we have intentionally emphasized the need for deeper inquiry and praxis (action and reflection of Freire, 1997) for each part of the cycle of inquiry, which is termed the Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) cycle in the improvement science framework.

More specifically, we merge the frameworks both in coursework and in the *intention* (equity focus) and *process* (participatory action research) of each dissertation project. The new, reimagined EdD framework has developed a new normative practice for design and delivery. We embrace engaging pedagogies and empower EdD students to work with colleagues in their contexts. Using a participatory action and action research methodology that stresses an activist approach to improve their practices, the EdD students develop co-practitioner-researcher teams at their sites. This team is an integral part of the journey of inquiry and praxis. We have learned that the use of CLE practices as a routine for the CPR or larger meetings is vital to success of the PAR (Paryani, 2019; Richardson Garcia, 2019). At these meetings, the leaders use protocols and processes such as PhotoVoice or guided inquiry with artistic reproductions to collect evidence that would typically be in survey form. Similarly, as one of the vignettes we highlight in the following section illustrates, we often support doctoral students at their school or district sites to host a Community Learning Exchange so that we can coach them in using the processes in their local contexts. The two vignettes featured in this article (Rosenthal, 2019; Welch, 2019) illustrate how using the processes provided key turning points for more deeply understanding the PAR inquiry.

EdD DOCTORAL STUDENT ACTIVISM

The previous section summarized our philosophical *why* and our procedural *how*. We now pivot to real stories, the voices of doctoral students who participated (and graduated) from the reimagined EdD. The students provide a first-hand account, *vis-à-vis*

vignettes, of their experiences engaging in a participatory action research project.

Ronny

The International School Bangkok (ISB) prides itself on being the premier international school in Thailand. The ISB is a private, nonprofit school, which was founded in 1951 and currently has close to 1,800 students from pre-kindergarten (age 3) to twelfth grade. The primary, middle, and high school are housed on one campus in one large building, but little interaction occurs between the divisions of the school. The school has everything a thriving student could want: excellent teachers, facilities that most schools can only dream of, and a flourishing after-school activities program. Despite the luxuries, the school is not perfect. My research indicated that students were experiencing stress despite having all these academic and extracurricular advantages. Was this anxiety due to the Thai culture, the school, or was there something else driving these students to be stressed?

When presented with the opportunity to do participatory action research for my doctoral studies, I decided to investigate how the social and emotional intersected with the academic challenges that students face at the ISB when transitioning from eighth grade to high school. I wanted to make recommendations to the school about easing the transition for future students. I worked with four social and emotional counselors and with twelve student co-practitioner-researchers (CPRs) from the four largest nationalities at the ISB – American, Thai, Japanese, and Korean. The student CPR participants consisted of three American females and one male, two female Japanese students, one Korean female, four Thai males, and one Thai female. The student participants ranged in age from 13 to 15 years of age.

I documented the struggles that the students encountered from the beginning of ninth grade until the first semester of their tenth-grade year through three participatory action research cycles. I am a high school science teacher, so I did not know my CPR students before conducting the research. The challenge was significant and required me to use a different kind of methodology to establish relationships with the students so I could collect authentic data on their transition experience. I surveyed the eighth-grade class in May 2017 to see which students would be interested in participating in the study and then sought written permission from their parents for them to participate. Not knowing the students, I had to think of innovative ways to get to earn their trust so I could get accurate information about their transition experiences. Throughout three participatory action research cycles, the students took surveys, met with me for interviews, drew the most stressful part of the transition as a picture that we analyzed individually, wrote a weekly diary of how they spent their time, and used PhotoVoice as an analysis tool to give a visual of the most stressful part of their transition (Wang et al., 1996). These interpersonal ways of collecting data allowed me to build trust and relationships quickly with the CPR group, which was beneficial in getting honest feedback and understanding the complexity of their individual transition experiences. The uniqueness of our relationship was evident during a presentation of the results when one colleague said, “I know more about twelve random students in your study than I do my own Advisory (pastoral care program) students whom I’ve known for two years.”

By using PhotoVoice and artistic representation as data collection, I was able to see the difficulties of the transitions. I

requested that the CPR students take a photo of the most stressful aspect of the transition at the end of their ninth-grade year. I collected these photos from the students, and we met in small groups to analyze the twelve pictures displayed on the classroom whiteboard. The students had to decide on consensus themes from the pictures. Each group saw similar issues from the images: academic grades, the amount of schoolwork, and managing time between school and their personal lives.

Through these photos, I was able to determine each student's individual struggles and how those struggles were similar and different. The Korean and Japanese students were struggling to stay on top of their studies in a second language while completing their Korean and Japanese courses on the weekends. Commuting in Bangkok traffic was difficult for those students living downtown since they spent at least two hours a day taking the bus to school and back home. The athletes and students involved in after-school activities were struggling to keep up with their extracurricular endeavors while maintaining their grades at acceptable levels. Most surprisingly, I learned from the interviews, drawings, and photos that students were placing unnecessary pressure on themselves, an internal pressure to succeed that was not being driven from home or by their peers (see Figures 1 and 2).

At the conclusion of our study, we found that teacher-student relationships were initially a problematic part of the transition but were a non-issue after a couple of months into the school year. However, social pressure to achieve, increased academic demands, an emphasis on grades, time prioritization challenges,

university planning, and internal pressure to succeed were common stressors.

In our research, we had most immediate changes in the science department, in which I teach. We found that students were often doing two major Independent Research Projects (IRP) simultaneously, which is time-consuming and stressful for students and redundant in terms of the skills we want to reinforce. With the help of our research, the high school science department changed the course offerings, which has allowed the department to assess students in additional areas. Our research demonstrated that creating relationships with students in semester-long classes was difficult. As a result, we changed a long-standing policy of semester-long science courses in biology, chemistry, and physics in ninth grade and moved to an integrated approach to teaching science as a year-long course. Students now have one teacher for all science courses in ninth grade, and that change made scheduling classes easier for students. The addition of integrated science allowed students to choose another semester elective, which has increased student choice in their academic schedule. I used our transitional research to recommend more collaboration time between science teachers in middle school and high school with the Director of Curriculum and Learning Support, which has helped to improve communication between the two school divisions. The middle school is now working backward from this collaboration to ensure the alignment of skills and content in sixth and seventh grade.

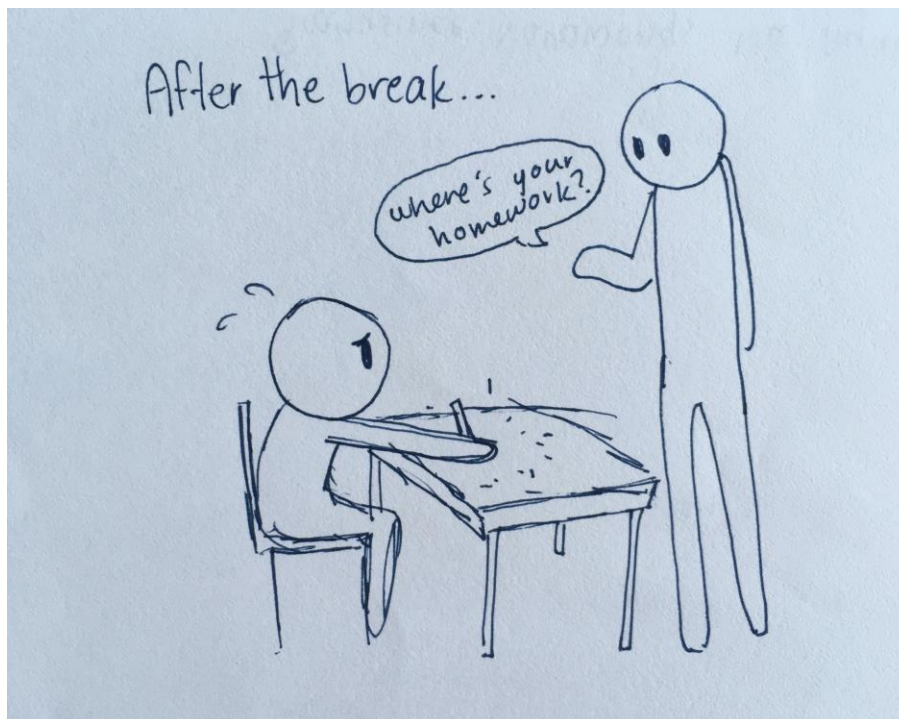


Figure 1. Increased academic demands were a primary stressor of the middle school to high school transition.

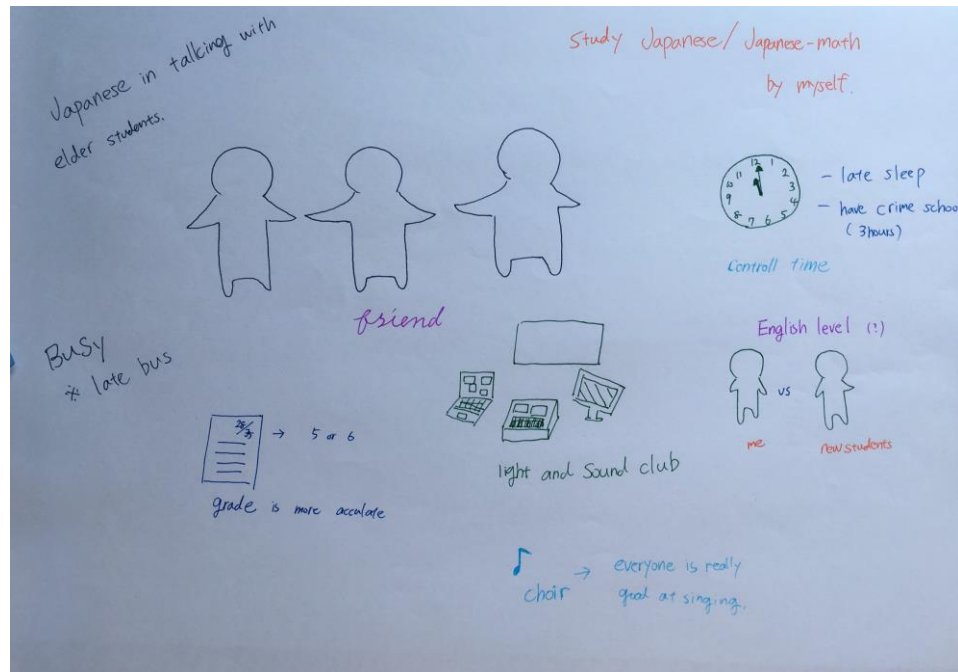


Figure 2. Balance between home life, schoolwork, and after-school activities was identified as one of the most stressful aspects of the middle school to high school transition.

The impact of change reached to other levels of the school. I facilitated three workshops on transitional stress that students encounter at the ISB for both middle school and high school staff and presented our findings and recommendations to the school leadership team. Recommendations included the hiring an additional social-emotional counselor in the high school, offering a social and emotional course in ninth grade, educating parents on the transition from middle school to high school, advocating for a universal grading system between the two schools, allowing for collaboration time between teachers in middle high schools, reducing the academic jump between eighth and ninth grade, creating an assessment calendar, providing additional activity counseling, vertically aligning the curriculum better, creating a bump-up day for students to experience ninth grade while still in eighth grade, and eliminating semester-long science courses in ninth grade.

The PAR left me with a critical understanding: *The voice of the student has been underserved with policy changes in the past when student voice should be at the forefront of decision-making in a school.* The research helped to bring the student perspective forward at ISB. More time has been devoted in Advisory to discussing academic and social-emotional stress, and students have been given a voice in advisory planning sessions to outline the pressure they are feeling as a group and the ways we can better serve them as educators. I remain a teacher-leader at the school and, with many of my colleagues, have been somewhat surprised at the multiple ways the PAR could affect local school changes and choices.

Lihi

The explicit social justice focus of ECU's EdD was key in my decision to enroll in the program. I pursued the degree with twin goals of sustaining my work as an educator for equity and advancing activism within my organization. It did not take long for these goals to

begin to materialize. From the start, when instructed to eschew the traditional *problem* of practice and instead investigate a *focus* of practice, the program steered me toward an asset-based approach to addressing complex educational issues. This stood in contrast to the common problematizing approach of locating deficits to be remediated, which invariably contributes to the educationalization of entrenched, cross-sector social problems (Labaree, 2008).

Through the use of design thinking strategies – including empathy-building, early probing, and prototyping – I could ensure my focus of practice stemmed directly from the voices of parent and staff activists, who quickly became my co-practitioner-researchers. Working as the regional executive director for a large community-based organization afforded me access to a wide swath of educational, mental health, and child welfare professionals within my agency, as well as to their school-based partners – the students, parents, faculty, staff, and leaders within the public schools in which my organization did its work. I gravitated toward the most vocal among parent and staff voices within one of these public schools, an elementary charter school serving racially diverse students in an under-resourced, urban setting. I was inspired by the collective quest among the school's constituents to envision a school community organized to support unconditional belongingness, rather than exclusionary discipline practices and other methods of sorting and segregation. The goal dovetailed with my organization's work and our existing partnership with the school, and was rooted in the activist tradition of radical inclusion, drawing from Dr. King's concept of the Beloved Community (<https://thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy/>). Choosing an equity-centered goal was only the beginning; ahead were the important steps of organizing for activist participation, doing the collectivist work required, and making meaning of this venture within the wider context of the school and community.



Setting the Table

To actualize the laudable goals of increasing belongingness and eliminating exclusionary discipline, the research group of parents, transdisciplinary school staff, and school leaders defined a theory of practice. Guided by our beliefs in the wisdom of the community and the power of collaboration, we defined our theory as follows: *if we provide meaningful structures for collective learning embedded in real-time data about the school's current culture and climate health, then we can continue the school's goal of eliminating the use of exclusionary discipline practices while simultaneously maintaining an organized and orderly learning environment in which all students belong.* Understanding the complexity inherent in our inquiry, we committed to interrogating root causes deeply, creating a fishbone diagram that incorporated both assets and challenges, and considering the intersecting conditions impacting the school at the macro, meso and micro systems levels. The approach is rooted in systems theory: the belief that meaningful change requires a high level of systemic overhaul, and that such systemic overhaul is best negotiated by constituents most closely affected by the current system (Bronfenbrenner, 1981).

To activate the principles of educational activism further, we determined the need to center not only those with day-to-day interactions with the school but indeed those most disenfranchised by its status quo, believing they were best capable of uncovering blind spots and setting priorities (Freire, 1997). To this end, we explicitly sought participation from constituents whose voices were least likely to be present, reaching out to families experiencing the impact of exclusionary discipline practices and engaging classified staff and community representatives. To provide access, I leveraged my role as a formal leader within the organization to ensure we had childcare and transportation available, provided meals for meetings, and identified co-facilitators who were credible messengers within the existing community (Baumbusch et al., 2008). How did these experiences and decisions to exchange with various stakeholders match up or align with course work? What background knowledge did the student need to prepare or gain before they could make decisions about the circumstances described above?

Doing the Work

We put in place the conditions for authentic, community-driven change. Yet, all too often promises of inclusion and access draw marginalized community members in, only to further their mistrust when these promises are not reflected in consistent practice. To actualize the goal of activating activism, I relied on the coursework in data collection and research design. Having first experienced the Community Learning Exchange (CLE) model with my EdD cohort, I was privileged to host two dissertation committee members as co-facilitators for our inaugural, multi-day CLE at the focal school site.

Several days before the CLE, all invitees were provided with pre-readings, including a summary of the CLE axioms presented earlier in this chapter (Guajardo et al., 2016) and the concept of gracious space, defined by the University of Washington's Center for Ethical Leadership as, "A spirit and a setting where we invite the stranger and learn in public" (Hughes & Grace, 2010, p. 21). Together, the CLE axioms and corresponding concept of gracious space helped frame the intention of the CLE: to create a space where hierarchy had been intentionally flattened and leadership thoughtfully distributed in order to facilitate the transfer of the community's own wisdom and strengths. By empowering the

people closest to the issues, encouraging appropriate boundary crossings, facilitating both critical conversation and other socially dynamic learning processes, and organizing around assets, hopes and dreams, the CLE sought to activate change from within. These axioms were supported by the attention given to embody gracious space, which set in place the conditions necessary - safety, trust, and space for strangeness - for powerful activist action aimed at large-scale change.

As the CLE itself began, we translated these concepts into embodied experiences. The room was purposefully designed to encourage collaboration and creativity, with table-top bins consisting of colored pencils, fidgets, sensory items, snacks, pens, and other learning supplies and white paper as tablecloths and on most walls to encourage written or artistic expression of key concepts. The first activity consisted of a welcoming circle and a mindfulness exercise, and three 30-minute breaks and a free, provided lunch sent the message that self- and community-care were being prioritized. Throughout the CLE, the axioms and gracious space were both explicitly modeled and contextualized by the participants given their preferences and needs. As individuals shared stories, participated in performative modalities (such as theater exercises and the creation of metaphors through visual and performance art), and co-constructed a definition of the values they brought collectively to the work, they did so within their natural, transdisciplinary teams. In this way, the CLE not only served as the vessel for interdependent learning and decision-making but as practice for how they would negotiate their common space in their work together so they could live out the values we were defining in practice. The King Center stresses such "practice sessions" as essential in embodying a beloved community, sustaining the efforts of activists hoping to disrupt current public education trends.

The scaffolding that the doctoral program afforded me in introducing the CLE pedagogy provided the opportunity to increase my comfort and confidence in utilizing similar activist "practice sessions" independently, and in so doing added a sustainable practice by which to generate community insights and organize for cultural change. I followed up on the introduction the CLE offered to expose additional activist-oriented approaches, including in selecting data collection processes such as PhotoVoice, which allowed participants to capture their insights about the school reform process by sharing photographs at each of our meetings and helping code these for common themes (Foster-Fishman et al., 2005). I relied on additional data collection tools, such as a one-minute essay which could be written or spoken at the end of our sessions, to collect evidence while equalizing voice to ensure the contributions of all participants were incorporated. The strategies contributed to an expanded understanding of the focus of practice and facilitated rich sense-making rooted in the holistic wisdom of the community. Ultimately, they led directly to many of the PAR's most salient findings by demonstrating that progress on laudable goals, such as the CPR team's desire to install trauma-informed alternatives to exclusionary discipline, began and ended with the ability to draw upon local strengths and passions.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Ronny needed a new way to hear from the often marginalized voices of students. He found a different methodology—PAR plus CLE routines and more imaginative data collection tools --that allowed for this. In the end, he was able to develop the necessary

trust with students to hear the authentic voices and was able to make changes based on the insights of the student voices. More importantly, the evidence from the PAR led to substantial local change in an organization that had rituals and routines that seemed impervious to change. The school leadership has seen the value of such research and the voices of students, and the high school has made substantial changes not only in policy and course design, but in relying more on student voice as a necessary component of decision-making.

For years, the middle school and high school at the ISB have primarily been operating independently of one another. As a member of the K-12 Science Curriculum Committee, he advocated for scheduling time between the transition years in the school (fifth and sixth grade, and eighth and ninth grade) to reduce the academic transition stress that students experience. He was able to use the evidence from the transitional research to recommend more collaboration time between science teachers in middle school and high school with the Director of Curriculum and Learning Support, which was granted. In presenting the findings to the school community, the evidence led to substantial changes at other levels of the school. He began to see his role as a teacher leader and student advocate in different terms as he has actively represented the voices of students to other. At the outset of the doctoral program, he might have said he was “just a science teacher,” but, by the conclusion, he saw the value of becoming a practitioner-researcher who used evidence to make changes.

In Lih'i's case, modeling the techniques and sharing in the responsibility for utilizing them soon gave way to evidence of transfer. As the co-practitioner-researchers (CPRs) gained facility with the CLE approach, they began to experiment with strategies for engaging additional constituents who had traditionally been left out of decision-making opportunities. In one example, students in grades K-2 were asked to envision their ideal school culture using visual arts modalities such as drawing and sculpture, titling their submissions with the assistance of classroom adults.

Lih'i's cycles of research unleashed important learning about the conditions required for sustained educational activism. Within her context, the inclusion of marginalized voices enabled a community-desired change. Perhaps more importantly, using the PAR processes promoted healing and repaired prior incidences of systemic harm. In Freire's (1997) words, “People are fulfilled to the extent that they create their world (which is a human world) and create it with their transforming labor” (p. 145). Still, harnessing the insights of community members who were frequently at the margins required a commitment to reckon with the harm they had experienced within the current system. The insight revealed the critical importance of promoting healing and resilience, a finding that mirrored those in other social movements. As Black Lives Matters Co-Founder Patrisse Khan-Cullors and co-author aasha bandele (2018) write of their work as activists in Ferguson, Missouri: “In our work we must always make space to confront trauma and to consider strategies for resistance” (p. 206).

The two dissertation vignettes in the article represent the integration of the three foundational frameworks and processes of an iterative and participatory research methodology: (1) community learning exchange protocols; (2) design thinking; and (3) improvement science tools. Other dissertations in our EdD tell the same story – transfer from theory to practice because the doctoral students were empowered to take risks, try new ways of doing and

collecting evidence, and collaborate intentionally with others in their local contexts to design and understand the work. Our focus to create activist-practitioners has been rooted in the work of developing practitioner-researchers. Our program design – pedagogies, activities, and PAR dissertation – integrates research (data collection and analysis), process (improvement science meet design thinking and learning exchanges) with practice.

To do this type of work, we have to disrupt university preparation systems, often resistant to change. Thus, creating and sustaining the program means a change in approach that often puts pressure on the current structures that strangle most university systems from making the necessary changes. For our re-imaged EdD it means one syllabus per semester that combines courses for the doctoral students and keeping busy leaders on track by writing weekly memos; it means faculty conversations that integrate coursework and the dissertation; it means dedicated advisors who have phone conversations about the PAR and how to organize CLEs on a biweekly basis; and it means a university system responsive to changing the number of chapters in a dissertation and not putting up barriers to a different way of doing the work. We believe the road to new practice is paved by creating useful new knowledge, by modeling the practices we think will make substantial change, and by reflecting deeply in order to act responsibly. Like the PAR process itself, leadership work is never sequential, nor does it stop. With core values as a constant beacon and strategic support from advisors deeply familiar with each student's context, we were able to make substantive changes in the way we operate as university faculty.

Our aim was to create an educational doctoral program for practitioner-researchers that embodied activism and social justice as beacon core values for the coordinators and the program design. At the same time, the values and the structure, frameworks, pedagogy, coursework, and support need to reinvigorate school and district leaders as they pursue an EdD. We created a transformative program to model how they too can transform their current conditions as they transfer knowledge into practice. We know the process starts with a disposition and a set of core beliefs about social justice; we recognize that the belief has to be reified in the ways we construct and instruct.

CONCLUSION

A common query at CPED events is: *What does a dissertation in practice look like?* In this article, we provided two examples of dissertations in practice. Moreover, we provided examples of students as activist practitioner-researchers. We do not separate research from practice nor practice from research. By fusing these roles together, and by anchoring our work in Participatory Action Research in the triumvirate of frameworks and processes of community learning exchanges, design thinking, and improvement science, our dissertations led to real, meaningful change (Rogers, 2003). Combined, the frameworks are invitational and nimble. Without the frameworks, Ronny would not have been able to learn with the students to make policy level change. Without the frameworks, Lih'i would not have been able to break the traditional hierarchy of school leadership. Without the frameworks, each would not have been able to be activist practitioner-researcher *in and beyond* their dissertations. In the end, the celebration is not the completion of the program, but how this the processes transfer into practice beyond the dissertation exercise and how the program graduates maintain themselves as leaders of equity.



When performance fails to meet goals, a search process for a solution intensifies (Cyert & March, 1963). The search process for a solution usually resides in the neighborhood of the problem itself. March (1997) stipulated, "Search is stimulated by a failure to achieve a goal and continues until it reveals an alternative that is good enough to satisfy existing evoked goals" (p. 12). Leadership programs, like other organizational innovations, have fallen into this solution trap and within years morph back to a traditional format (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). The structure of programs needs to be adjusted, but without frameworks that provide space for risk-taking, inquiry, participation, and conversation, programs will tinker with different approaches, but not attempt to reinvent themselves.

Students in our reimagined program are practitioner-researchers. In the role, they engage a wide scope of community members, and they honor the context of their place and the wisdom of the people in their school and surrounding communities. They use an equity lens on all evidence, and they push colleagues to more equitable practices in leadership and classrooms. For us this is the definition of activist scholars. For us this is a way to foster the development of data-informed, inclusive, equity-minded practitioners who can develop capacity as qualitative researchers to have methods of evidence collection and analysis that can be translated into school and district improvement.

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