

Developing and Sustaining Northeastern's EdD Program During and Post Pandemic

Cherese Childers-McKee 
Northeastern University
c.childers-mckee@northeastern.edu

Sara Ewell
Northeastern University
s.ewell@northeastern.edu

Joan Giblin 
Northeastern University
j.giblin@northeastern.edu

Joseph McNabb 
Northeastern University
j.mcnabb@northeastern.edu

Melissa Parenti
Northeastern University
m.parenti@northeastern.edu

ABSTRACT

Northeastern University's EdD faculty faced unique challenges during the pandemic and racial reckoning following George Floyd's murder. During this period, however, we found opportunities to adapt and improve our program. We prioritized compassion and connection. We made significant strides in curriculum development through design and implementation of three new concentrations. We focused all program elements on how social justice works in a variety of educational settings. We altered our approach to data collection and doctoral supervision. In so doing, we were able to maintain consistency for our students and develop a closer bond with our faculty colleagues.

KEYWORDS

education doctorate, racial justice, pandemic, online program, curriculum

Northeastern University's EdD program faced a distinct set of opportunities related to the pandemic and to racial reckoning following the murder of George Floyd. While other programs moved to remote education, our program, online for over ten years, found opportunities to develop a more compassionate approach to our students, to create closer connections between and among faculty, to refine social justice elements within our curriculum, and to reimagine approaches to student networking and conducting research. Our work began with the following question: How can we adapt our program to better serve our students considering the pandemic and the racial reckoning following the murder of George Floyd? We formed an academic program review learning community (Hoare & Hondzel, 2022), allowing us to engage in a curriculum refresh process through this time.

CONSISTENCY, CREATIVITY, AND CONNECTION DURING THE PANDEMIC

The pandemic demanded creativity and flexibility. We knew our students needed to balance work, school, and home responsibilities. Our students, often in lockdown status and working asynchronous from areas around the world, began to seek solace in consistency. Our program became one space to offer consistency. We were intentional in accomplishing this through increased faculty and program outreach. We responded by offering more synchronous sessions and saw a tremendous increase in attendance. It became the norm to hold doctoral advising sessions with a 2-year-old child on a student's lap or a 10-year-old child throwing Legos in the background. We understood that our students and our colleagues had increased caretaking responsibilities. That knowledge allowed both students and faculty to develop a more considerate, realistic view of everyone's responsibilities.



New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.



This journal is published by Pitt Open Library Publishing.



This journal is supported by the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate: A Knowledge Forum on the EdD (CPED) cpedinitiative.org

impactinged.pitt.edu
Vol. 9 No. 1 (2024)

ISSN 2472-5889 (online)
DOI 10.5195/ie.2024.409



Not only did the pandemic help us grow our connection with students, but it also amplified a bond among our faculty as well. Each author held a faculty leadership position within the EdD program; collectively, we were responsible for the EdD's program review and continuous improvement. We worked closely together for several years, prior to the pandemic and George Floyd's murder, building the program. We were the Magnificent Eight, a name bestowed on the first eight faculty to teach in the program, responsible for evaluating and improving the new curriculum. We met frequently to revise syllabi, ensure connections between the core classes, and discuss pedagogical approaches to the curriculum. As such, we established professional relationships with each other, but as professional colleagues.

Prior to the pandemic, our work was primarily remote, gathering a few times per year for in-person meetings, conferences, and residencies. As such, we were mainly online and maintained a professional distance. Our families were kept away from our workspaces and experiences. We rarely saw each other's families on-screen, despite working online nearly full-time.

During this period, as things changed, our program maintained a sense of normalcy and stability because it was already online. However, the pandemic blurred family and work lines. It allowed for deeper relationships among faculty which, in turn, fostered greater ingenuity, creativity, innovation, and risk taking. This inspired a newfound confidence for doctoral teaching and chairing.

At the basic level, we shared pieces of ourselves that had not felt appropriate in the past. For example, young children often said hello at the start of meetings and led to conversations about the challenges of being a working parent. Other faculty colleagues would share perspectives on living alone during such uncertain times. There were also opportunities to share about passion projects and hobbies. These occurrences springboarded closer personal connections that led to deeper and more empathetic relationships. As a result of these deeper relationships, there was a willingness for us, as faculty, to take risks and be more creative in our work. In meetings, faculty members offered new, out of the box ideas and shared solutions that may not have been previously considered. When we shared ideas, there was additional consideration and thoughtfulness in responses, reflecting our improved relationships as faculty colleagues.

We also strengthened our ability to collaboratively work through programmatic challenges. For example, after the first few groups of students completed their coursework, it became clear that having dissertation chairs teach research courses to all their advisees was not a sustainable model based on workloads and fiscal matters. This was an aspect of the program that many faculty members felt was critical and had spent considerable time and effort designing program outcomes and coursework around. Making this change required difficult conversations and compromises that required patience and consideration of all stakeholders' viewpoints. Ultimately, a decision was made that reflected the expertise of the group and the needs of the students and program. Faculty members believed that despite this difficult change, their voices were heard and understood.

Faculty relationships, both personal and professional, continue to reflect the deep connections that were formed during the pandemic. As a program, we are strengthened by these relationships and continue to better serve our students as a result.

EQUITY, ENGAGEMENT, AND EMPOWERMENT IN CURRICULUM REVISION

The pandemic was a time of intense turmoil in the nation. During this time, we turned inward to reflect on our program and identify spaces needing improvement. It is difficult to say what urged us forward - whether it was being sheltered for long periods of time, the change in the pace of our lives and schedules, the racial unrest that the country was experiencing, being bombarded with social media messages about the pandemic being a time to do something new, or simply our stubbornness and insistence that we would not let the pandemic change how hard we have always worked for our students. As a collective group, continuous improvement of the curriculum was foremost in our minds, given our roles and responsibilities of ensuring our students received the best possible doctoral education. We worked closely with program faculty, leadership, and the result was a curriculum refresh.

The process described above aligns with Hoare and Hondzel's (2022) conceptual model of the program review team for academic program review learning community. In contrast to centralized models and hierarchical models common in higher education (Holcombe et al., 2021), Hoare and Hondzel (2022) advocate for a community-based model utilizing the principles of distributed leadership situated within the best practices found in professional learning communities. The program review team, typically made of three to five members, forms the nucleus of the community. Hoare and Hondzel (2022) specifically note the socialness of learning as key to a successful, community-based approach to a program review team.

The model contains five additional layers, each focused on supporting the program review team. These layers include an interdisciplinary program cohort, senior leadership, quality assurance practitioners, alignment with the mission and vision, and regulatory requirements (Hoare & Hondzel, 2022). Of relevance to our experiences, we focused on amplifying the social justice mission and vision of our program through the curriculum refresh.

Our experiences confirm Hoare and Hondzel's (2022) reflections that structural conditions which enable the building of relationships, distributed leadership, and on-going faculty conversations creates more effective change and a more efficient approach to continuous improvement in the end. Our experiences through the pandemic and the summer of racial justice created more opportunities for relationship building, which in turn, led to increased peer support amongst the faculty (Hall & Hord, 2015). Through spending increasingly vulnerable moments together, our relationships grew and strengthened, and our bonds allowed us to engage in communal sense-making of what the curriculum was and should be. Prior to the curriculum refresh, students in our program took seven core courses, four concentration courses, and two electives. The concentrations available to them were Higher Education Administration, Curriculum, Teaching, Learning, and Leadership, and Organizational Leadership Studies. Students took one core course entitled Leadership for Social Justice and other social justice topics scattered throughout the concentration courses. Our students engaged in action research, a methodology with social justice underpinnings, and frequent conversations about privileging the voices of the marginalized in their dissertation research. As a program, we valued social justice, a core value, one of our program's learning objectives, and a part of our value propositions. However, as is common in many liberal academic circles, we also fell victim to

some dangerous assumptions: our students knew we were committed to social justice, social justice was integrated in our coursework, and we were centering justice and the needs of marginalized learners in our pedagogy.

We formed an academic review learning community. It was tested early and often. When George Floyd was murdered and racial unrest of 2020 shook the nation, we asked ourselves some tough questions; in what way does our current curriculum address issues of race, inequality, and social justice; are there gaps that need to be filled; how can we support students of color within our program; does our faculty reflect a commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion; are we incorporating diverse perspectives and voices in our coursework and reading materials. And our students held us accountable. In a series of student focus groups, we learned that many of our students of color felt marginalized and unsupported in the program. Our efforts at centering justice in the program were not as apparent to them as we thought. And many believed that as a program, we were doing little to support equity and justice. We committed to understanding these viewpoints, both from the perspectives of the students and honoring the perspectives of our diverse faculty community. These realizations, though harsh, urged us forward. As scholar practitioners, we wanted to fix this—we wanted to do better.

Since those moments of reflection and reawakening, we convened new curriculum committees, created three new concentrations – which included 11 new courses. We shifted our pedagogy to include transparency in assignment design (Winkelmes et al., 2019). Additionally, we increased our percentage of faculty members of color and supported the creation of a graduate student organization.

Our concentrations now include Workplace Learning, Transformative School Leadership, Innovative Teaching and Learning, in addition to Higher Education Administration. In each of these, we pushed ourselves beyond mentions of social justice to centering justice and diving deeply into how social justice work looks in a variety of educational settings. In creating our new concentrations, we went into the field and collected data from a diverse array of alumni, educational leaders, business leaders, and current students. Then, we worked to create a curriculum that directly addressed identified needs. With policy, equity, and innovation as guiding pillars, we created new courses that did not just mention social justice and change agency but sought to tackle tough educational issues. In *Designing Educational Systems for Justice and Equity*, students learn to be, not just allies, but co-conspirators (Love, 2019) as they engage in dialogue about radical and humanizing educational change movements (Andrews et al., 2019). In courses like *Landscape for Educational Leadership* and *Landscape of Teaching and Learning*, students develop knowledge of transformative and justice-oriented models of leadership, teaching, and learning. Then, they learn how to create, shape, and mold change initiatives as curricularists, school leaders, or learning officers in the courses, *Leading and Managing Change*, *Leading the Learning Strategy* and *Designing Transformative Curriculum and Professional Development*. Finally, in the elective courses, they have an opportunity to work collaboratively with a diverse array of network partners on real-life, educational challenges confronting schools and communities.

We worked hard to broaden our lens on diversity to expand beyond the Black/White binary. For example, in the Higher Education Administration concentration, we increased conversations and

connections to scholars studying tribal colleges. To better support our students, we supported the creation of a Graduate Student Educational Research Association (GSERA) which has created a mentorship program between recent alums and current students. To provide greater student choice, we created the Integrated Studies concentration where students create their own concentration experience from the available options.

We made significant strides in curriculum development during a time of intense crisis. However, federal and state mandates during the pandemic and Northeastern University's Institutional Review Board impacted our students' abilities to conduct doctoral research.

GUIDANCE, GROWTH, AND STABILITY IN DOCTORAL SUPERVISION

The pandemic impacted our normal supervision of doctoral student research. Our program is 100% online, with a once a year two to four day residency requirement for over a decade. Our students, despite attending courses online and meeting with faculty synchronously via video conferencing software, had conducted their doctoral research activities face-to-face. Faculty advised students to conduct face-to-face interviews, our research protocols dictated paper informed consent forms, and observations took place in on-ground classrooms. Despite a high level of comfort in the faculty and the students around online interactions, the pandemic necessitated a shift in how we supervised doctoral research.

Given our familiarity with remote coursework, faculty initially assumed the transition to remote research would only be technical in nature. One example of this shift included moving to a survey form check box to replace the paper informed consent forms. However, as the pandemic progressed, faculty realized that conducting research online created unique challenges and opportunities. Our students conducted their research under novel situations, became experts at remote recruiting, and surfaced questions and observations unfamiliar to the faculty.

Dissertation chairs, accustomed to guiding students through their first research efforts, adjusted their mindset to learn from students about the intricacies of recruiting and conducting data collection in a remote setting. Faculty recognized the need for students to network and learn from each other was vitally important during the independent research years. Faculty created more spaces for synchronous student networking, which garnered little interest from students in pre-pandemic times. Along with small, informally organized student groups, larger department wide conversations took place. Faculty intentionally created space in residencies and classes to discuss online data collection, recruitment, and analysis. These efforts to network students and faculty together continue today.

One of the unexpected benefits of remote data collection included richer data. Many of our students observe staff meetings, classrooms, and student gatherings as a part of their data collection. Dissertation chairs adapted observation checklists and encouraged students to record the observations. Unexpectedly, this led to richer and more robust data. Students no longer felt frazzled trying to record everything via field notes, but instead could focus on following the threads of conversation. Reviewing the recordings allowed individuals to record, pause, and pay attention to several types of actions or to follow diverse individuals' non-verbal communication patterns through the meeting. Student researchers also noted when



participants were “checked out” or not paying attention to the issue at hand. Student researchers could more easily detect exactly when participants became disengaged, and isolate when and why this occurred. This switch led to richer data collection for observations.

Despite the benefits from recording, challenges also quickly surfaced. Without being physically in the space, student researchers faced challenges in detecting nuances in emotions, especially when engaging group data collection methods such as focus groups or observations. Large groups amplified this challenge, as did issues with technology. For example, if participants sat with only their side profile visible, detecting non-verbal communication became more difficult. Once dissertation chairs became aware of this issue, they encouraged research designs that began with an observation, followed by semi-structured interviews. They worked with the student to carefully craft interview protocols that could delve into the nuances of participant responses, the overall atmosphere of the room, and the diverse emotional or non-verbal signals that might have been overlooked during the initial observation phase. This blended approach of observation followed by targeted interviews in an online environment provided a more holistic understanding of the research participant, ensuring that subtle yet significant aspects of non-verbal communication were not missed.

An unexpected benefit was the availability of transcription tools through Zoom, which improved equity in data collection by eliminating the financial barrier to transcription services. Northeastern University provides all students with Zoom accounts, and Zoom automatically creates transcripts from the recordings. With this transcription tool available to all students, length of time in the program was no longer connected to paying for transcriptions. Previously, only those students with disposable income could afford transcription services. Other students transcribed their qualitative data on their own. This led to an increased amount of time analyzing data for some students and increased their time in the program. Thus, this unexpected benefit addressed an issue that concerned faculty for many years.

Finally, our model is a two cycle action research model. Cycle 1 is the investigative phase of the research study in which students collect and analyze data; Cycle 2 is the phase in which students implement and action step and evaluate its effectiveness. The pandemic forced the faculty to clarify and crystallize what prolonged engagement meant. How does one create prolonged engagement in a situation where everyone is remote, everyone is dealing with multiple issues, and everyone has to balance work, home, and life? We found that smaller groups, with increased time between the researcher and the participants, provided an excellent way to create prolonged engagement to move forward. This created greater consistency for students and continues today.

The implication from our experience as an academic program review learning community is simple, yet powerful. As Hoare and Hondzel (2022) theorized, structural elements that provide the time and space to enable relationship building allowed us to undergo a significant curriculum refresh during the pandemic. In our case, the pandemic provided a catalyst, which decreased barriers and increased relationship building. These relationships formed the foundation that developed trust in our shared leadership within the group.

HARMONIZING INNOVATION AND STABILITY

In conclusion, the EdD faculty at Northeastern University faced distinct challenges during the pandemic and the societal reckoning prompted by George Floyd's murder. However, we seized the opportunity to adapt and enhance our program, placing emphasis on compassion, connection, and social justice. We made modifications to our data collection methods and doctoral supervision approach, ensuring continuity and consistency for our students while fostering stronger relationships among faculty members. Looking back on those pandemic years, we are grateful for our students' accomplishments. Notably, in 2021, we celebrated the graduation of 221 students, most of whom were part of the inaugural class of our revamped action research program. Alumni surveys revealed that 92% of those graduates actively participated in change initiatives focused on social justice, and all disseminated the outcomes of their research. We continue to use their Dissertations in Practice as exemplary models for our current students and immensely impressed by the profound impact and wide-ranging scope of their work.

REFERENCES

- Andrews, D. J. C., Brown, T., Castillo, B., & Jackson, D. (2019). Beyond damage-centered teacher education: Humanizing pedagogy for teacher educators and preservice teachers. *Teachers College Record*, 121(6), 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811912100605>
- Hoare, A., & Hondzel, C. D. (2022). Forming an academic program review learning community: Description of a conceptual model. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 30(4), 401–415. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QAE-01-2022-0023>
- Holcombe, E. M., Kezar, A. J., Elrod, S. L., & Ramsley, J. A. (Eds.). (2021). *Shared leadership in higher education: A framework for responding to a changing world*. Taylor & Francis.
- Love, B. (2019). *We want to do more than survive: Abolitionist teaching and the pursuit of educational freedom*. Beacon Press.
- Winkelmess, M. A., Boye, A., & Tapp, S. (Eds.). (2019). *Transparent design in higher education teaching and leadership: A guide to implementing the transparency framework institution-wide to improve learning and retention*. Stylus.