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Completely Whole:

Defending Freedom During the Dissertation Process

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the narratives of two doctoral candidates in a curriculum and instruction program, revealing their dissertation experiences after challenging conventional norms in their coursework. Through qualitative analysis, we identify themes of cultural authenticity, power of the academy, and theory vs. practice. These themes underscore the importance of resisting institutional pressures to maintain traditional structures and learning designs, allowing for innovative research processes. The students' stories emphasize staying true to the transformative nature of their coursework and themselves. We conclude with recommendations for students and professors interested in re-envisioning the dissertation's purpose and process.

KEYWORDS

CPED dissertation in practice (DiP), applied dissertation, culturally responsive leadership, critical leadership studies, critical inquiry

Universities are the foremost institutions responsible for knowledge production and generation (Godin & Gingras, 2000) and shaping society (Bellah et al., 1991). As professors, we participate in this process through our scholarship and student engagement. We create programs and enact pedagogy to immerse students in the discipline's underlying epistemology, ontology, and axiology. Broadly, the associated unspoken assumptions emit a Eurocentric-informed definition of what counts as knowledge and what is considered scholarship.

Our institution's EdD within the Curriculum and Instruction specialization commits to cultivating leaders who inspire and support cultural awareness, sustainability, and revitalization. We challenge the normative notions of both knowledge and scholarship production. Our doctoral students experience these aspirations through emergent, non-linear, and liberatory pedagogy. We ask students to bridge theory and practice and demonstrate their understanding through multiple modalities (drawings, graphic organizers, conceptual maps, videos, podcasts, and papers). As students journey through the program, they raise their critical consciousness, unlearning Eurocentrically imposed positions, actions, and habits.

Our decision to take this stance reflects the recognition that the university's role is not solely knowledge production. Instead, it plays a role in contributing to the maintenance of a democratic society (Biesta, 2007). In taking such a viewpoint, our approach often sits at odds with the normative posture of the academy writ large. This dissonance is evident when our students reach the dissertation stage of their doctoral journey. Those who complete coursework emerge genuinely changed. A dissonance between coursework and dissertation freedom became visible, leaving students frustrated. Namely, chairs expressed implicit or explicit messages that dissertation styles and processes must fall within a rigid, prescriptive format and return to positivist forms and presentations of that research. Such messages were contrary to the purpose of the programs' efforts to connect research to innovative and transcendent possibilities. Not all students were willing to color within the lines and instead confront oppressive structures and expectations.

This article provides insights into two doctoral candidates' experiences of resisting the status quo. Lavender and Sage provide a narrative of navigating their dissertation experience after embracing the disruption of conventional norms through their coursework. The individual and intersecting accounts reveal the nature of their struggle to surpass normative forces at play, making their achievement nearly insurmountable. Each story illuminates strategies to transcend the narrow constructs of knowledge and scholarship and to break barriers while conducting their dissertation work. Each candidate shares how they remained authentic to the transformative nature of their coursework and of themselves. Their stories highlight the significance of resisting the pressure to maintain the existing conditions within university courses and our research processes and products.

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PHILOSOPHY AND PEDAGOGY

We contextualize the narratives to disclose the philosophy and pedagogical underpinning of our EdD Curriculum and Instruction specialization. The specialization, which includes courses in leadership, research, and curriculum and instruction, is steeped in foundations that radically and critically examine education to transform learning contexts into equitable contexts that center on marginalized realities. Thus, coursework requires critically examining positionality, normative structures, and learning designs.

Positionality

From the beginning, students reflect on their positionalities in formal assignments and informal class discussions. Here, we refer to positionality as how the social world shapes one's identity and, thus, their worldview (Harding, 1991). Students unpack the complexities framed through social, cultural, political, and historical lenses (Collins, 1993; Haraway, 1991), teasing out intersectionalities (Crenshaw, 1989). As part of exploring themselves, students dissect what shapes their epistemologies, ontologies, and axologies, unveiling unconscious assumptions and actions in the world. Students reveal how identity is tied to macro, meso, and micro-social interactions throughout their coursework and how integral enculturation shapes their work in the world (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Malterud, 2001). As bell hooks (1990) reminds us, we must be critically mindful of ourselves so that we can work to prevent reproducing historical oppression and marginalization of those with whom we work. In this way, we commit to ongoing critical reflexivity. To be reflexive is to embrace "subjective understandings of reality as a basis for thinking more critically about the impact of our assumptions, values, and actions on others" (Cunliffe, 2004, p. 407). Reflexivity is necessary for gaining control over inclinations and dispositions (including in our thought and perception) and transforming us from agents of action into something more akin to subjects of action (Bourdieu, 1989).

Normative Structures

Engaging in critical reflexivity for transformative action requires that students question their positionalities and the power relationships embedded in institutional structures. Students begin by confronting colonization, Eurocentric mindsets, and dominant culture. Students read and interrogate the social foundations of curriculum and the intentional efforts to invoke cultural assimilation and Indigenous erasure (Au et al., 2017; Grande, 2004). Together, we survey organizational structures not as fixed but instead as living entities that shift and grow with leadership that is transformative, critical, educative, and ethical (Smyth, 2017). We illuminate institutional roles in maintaining the machine (Weber, 1922) and reproducing education and social structures (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In doing so, we bring to light the importance of relationships and interrelationships as foundational to successful, continuously evolving organizations. In this way, we inspire equity-informed change, remembering that "dominator culture has tried to keep us all afraid, to make us choose safety instead of risk, sameness instead of diversity. Moving through that fear, finding out what connects us, reveling in our differences; this is the process that brings us closer, that gives us a world of shared values, of meaningful community" (hooks, 2003, p. 197). As the hidden acceptance of the norm surfaces, we invite students to "restructure, rewrite, and reimagine institutions that are culturally and racially inclusive" (Lyiscott, 2019, p.76).

Learning Designs

Our courses explore curricular past, present, and possible futures. We examine positivism (Giddens, 1974), constructivism (Glasersfeld, 1989) and culturally sustaining/revitalizing pedagogies (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2017) to awaken students to the longstanding role of education as a tool to strip non-White people of their cultures. Slowly, the unconscious recognition comes into focus, realizing that curriculum aids in adhering to society's dominant discourses and expectations rather than authentically creating caring relationships that honor students' racial and cultural experiences (Valenzuela, 2016). Collective memory memorializes Whiteness (Lyiscott, 2019) as schools and society join in developing a workforce that can progress society (Kress & Lake, 2014), reinforcing Eurocentric values and knowledge (Spring, 2021). Drawing on Critical Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis, students tease out the impact of White privilege, ideology, and hegemony on "everyday micro-level manifestations that stem from deeper-rooted macro-level issues" (Lyiscott, 2019, p. 71). After making history visible and present, students design emergent, flexible, and fluid learning spaces that center on race and resist dehumanizing school policies (Navarro, 2020). Seeing diversity as cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) means that our designs for engagement become tapestries, cultural mosaics if you will, showing the simultaneity of differences in language, traditions, and beliefs to create community (Appiah, 2006). Our students learn that to see, making it impossible to unsee inequities.

In short, aspiring doctoral students spend their three years of coursework unlearning what has been indoctrinated in them and then agentically disturbing norms and playing outside the game. This journey becomes contradictory to the academic dissertation's nature, expectations, and history.

THE DISSERTATION

The dissertation, the last milestone of the dissertation journey, is the student's opportunity to illustrate they have met the Curriculum and Instruction specialization requirements. Historically, and upon the rise of the doctorate, the dissertation process and product mirrored and embodied technical rationality (Schön, 1995). Rationality includes identifying and designing research to solve social problems systematically. Technicality means the process is incremental and linear (Anderson & Herr, 1999). To be successful, students work independently to show their accumulation of knowledge (Carr & Kemmis, 1986), producing an autonomously written artifact.

More recently, the dissertation has become a topic for discourse, with scholarship supporting a research approach that blurs the lines of normality and interrogates dissertation types, methodological decisions, and writing practices (Anderson et al., 2021; Paltridge et al., 2012). While the more traditional single-authored, paper-based dissertation exhausted with Western epistemologies may be revered as scholarship, its format has become outdated and obsolete (Patton, 2011). Contemporary scholarship suggests a need to move to a fluid approach to knowledge, research, and performance that centers students' experiences and creates a more mobilized project that reflects our

students, organizations, and society (Giroux, 2011). A transformative approach to the dissertation process has grown as we recognize the complexities of the relationships between theory and practice among educational leaders and the growing relevance of equity, equality, and deconstruction of colonialism. This dialogue inspired an evolved dissertation that includes professional practice and preparing doctoral candidates to become scholarly practitioners (Archbald, 2011; Kot & Hendel, 2012; Tamim & Torres, 2022; Taysum, 2006).

The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) has committed to reimagining the dissertation. Their task force offers insights into moving beyond the traditional five-chapter dissertation to a format that promotes innovative, rigorous, and inquiry-based practices (Boyce, 2012; CPED, 2021; Perry, 2016). The CPED organization developed four tenets that guide the work of projects referred to as the Dissertation in Practice (DiP). These include:

- Considering actionable points that allow faculty and students to engage in new reimagined dissertation models.
- Identifying new opportunities for DiPs.
- Conveying potential barriers to engaging in and conducting reimagined DiP models (CPED, 2021).

Our faculty externally engaged in this conversation. Namely, faculty questioned the dissertation's authenticity as fitting the work that students do and will do in the future. Drawing on CPED, our Educational Leadership Department engaged in an appreciative inquiry process to envision an EdD dissertation to consider its dissertation's expectations, format(s), and assessment procedures. Appreciative inquiry has four phases: Inquire/Discover, Imagine/Dream, Innovate/Design, and Implement/Deploy. After completing appreciative interviews of department faculty (Phase 1: Inquire/Discover) and holding a two-day retreat with interactive and emergent thinking activities (Phase 2: Imagine/Dream and Phase 3: Innovate/Design), a small subset of faculty leaders drafted a design statement, design principles, and operating principles for what we decided to call the Inquiry Dissertation for Impact (IDI).

The design statement reads as follows: Doctoral candidates in the Educational Leadership EdD program in the Watson College of Education undergo an evolution from student to scholar as they critically, creatively, and reflexively engage in the world. As transformational leaders, candidates bridge theory and practice to generate solutions for positive educational and social change. The Inquiry Dissertation for Impact (IDI) is emergent—it may involve multiple, diverse, and evolving processes and formats while adhering to specified design principles to maintain rigor.

Similar to CPED, the principles for the IDI design principles include:

- The IDI is relevant, feasible, and ethical.
- The IDI process and product(s) are culturally and contextually responsive.
- The IDI evidences sound methodological decisions.
- The IDI generates positive change for the EdD candidate and community of practice.

After finalizing these stages, COVID-19 fell upon us. This unexpected event left the Implement/Deploy stage in limbo. Many professors were nervous about leading their students through the process, asking, what does the IDI look like? How will I know what is rigorous, relevant, ethical, and feasible? The questions continued as many professors wanted checklists and examples of what an IDI would resemble. While the ongoing development of the IDI hit a standstill, there was interest in piloting the process with several students. A handful of us resisted providing rubrics or examples, returning the conversation to the foundational design principles. We continued to strive toward the IDI, and this manuscript shares what we have learned.

METHODS AND DATA COLLECTION

This study employed a qualitative, narrative inquiry approach to deeply explore the experiences of two doctoral candidates as they embarked on their Inquiry Dissertation for Impact (IDI) journeys. Narrative inquiry is particularly suited for understanding lived experiences, as it allows participants to share their stories in a way that reflects their personal and cultural contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As dissertation committee members, the authors collaborated closely with the candidates, adopting a co-constructive stance that supported their transition from coursework to independent scholarly inquiry. This approach facilitated academic growth and fostered a sense of agency and empowerment among the candidates, consistent with notions of education as a practice of freedom (Freire, 1970).

Participant Profiles

To provide context, we briefly profile the participants whose diverse backgrounds significantly influenced their IDI journeys. The first participant, Lavender, a Black woman from a single-parent household, navigated higher education as a first-generation college student. With a decade of K-12 teaching experience, she brought a rich perspective to her IDI, deeply informed by her lived experiences and the systemic challenges she encountered. Participant 2, Sage, a White, middle-class woman, possessed extensive experience in public education, including roles as a classroom teacher, curriculum specialist, and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math [STEM] coordinator. A commitment to educational equity and innovation in STEM education shaped her journey.

Research Design

The IDI itself served as a methodological framework, guiding the candidates to bridge theory and practice while fostering personal and contextual transformation. This praxis-based approach aligns with transformative research paradigms that emphasize the co-construction of knowledge and the importance of research that benefits both the researchers and their communities (Lather, 1986; Tierney & Sallee, 2008). By engaging in the IDI process, the candidates were encouraged to reflect critically on their practice, situating their work within broader socio-political contexts and striving for social justice and equity in education.

Data Collection

We employed a multi-faceted data collection strategy to capture the nuances of the candidates' experiences.

- Narrative Inquiry: Each candidate authored a detailed narrative chronicling their IDI journey, including challenges, successes, and reflections. This self-authored documentation served as a foundational data source, allowing the candidates to articulate their experiences in their own voices.

- Collaborative Dialogue: Regular Zoom meetings provided opportunities for the candidates to share experiences, support each other, and engage in critical dialogue. These sessions were instrumental in fostering a collaborative learning environment, where the exchange of ideas and mutual support were central to the research process.
- Post-Dissertation Reflection: A final Zoom meeting was conducted to revisit the IDI process collectively and identify key themes. This reflective dialogue was essential for synthesizing the experiences and insights gained throughout the IDI, contributing to a deeper understanding of the transformative potential of the dissertation process.

Data Analysis

Narrative analysis was the primary analytic approach, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the candidates' lived experiences. This method is particularly effective in educational research, as it provides a means to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences and construct their identities through storytelling (Riessman, 2008). We employed thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and meanings within the narratives and transcripts, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for rigorously coding and categorizing data.

Critical reflexivity was integral to the research process, guiding our interpretation of the data and ensuring that our own perspectives did not unduly influence the findings (Finlay, 2002). This study offers a rich and authentic portrayal of the IDI experience by centering the candidates' voices and employing rigorous qualitative methods. This approach underscores the importance of researcher reflexivity and the ethical responsibility to represent participants' stories accurately and respectfully (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

NARRATIVES

Lavender and Sages's narratives afford the reader insight into the candidates' experience. Each narrative reflects the relationship between the student and doctoral candidates' experiences. These narratives illuminate the emerging themes across their experiences, themes that assist in providing insight into challenging the conventional expectations of the dissertation, particularly following four years of (un)learning normative and oppressive structures.

Lavender's Story

I've chosen to define the journey of confronting colonization, Eurocentric mindsets, and dominant culture as grief. Grief is longstanding, deeply painful, traumatic, silencing, and personal. Gloria Anzaldúa (2015) speaks to this journey of self-actualization, noting that to step into the transformative power of risking the personal. We develop a critical conocimiento, open ourselves up to alternative ways of knowing, and destabilize the dominant Westernized epistemologies.

The journey of *becoming*, in this context, a doctoral journey to becoming Dr. Lavender was a place of reconciled grief that was buried in my earlier years as a teacher. Who was I? What was teacher life like? Where was I going? The pieces of my identity that were not welcomed into yt (white) spaces.

Grief...

Erasure,

The level of liberatory pedagogy I experienced during my coursework remains unnamed, and perhaps as this body of work progresses, we will try to rename our disruptive epistemology. Years of linear normative ways of theorizing, researching, and performing were obsolete, and I had to step into unknown space to set a path of resistance. Down the path of self-discovery, I chose to do a research project that sought to name the unoccupied space of Black Women Teachers (BWT). I wanted the narratives of the BWT to become alive and to tell a story that would speak to their experiences individually and collectively. That seemingly was the easy part; the more difficult part was to get a chair and committee to understand and trust the authenticity of my research as a novice Black qualitative researcher, resisting normative Westernized epistemologies and methodologies. I sought out a Black woman chair who was not new to Black Feminism, resisting the status quo, or occupied spaces of ytness—seasoned with experience in navigating the politics of upholding the status quo while also maintaining integrity with the protecting validity of the research.

Remembering Grief…

I was an experienced teacher, mentoring a beginning teacher one year when I went down to her room to check in with her and found her crying. She told me it was hard, her students were hard, and she hadn't been taught how to teach "those kids"- the Black and brown kids, that is. I told her that every teacher feels overwhelmed and defeated during the first few months of teaching, but she just had to stick with it because "it will be good for you." I remembered the way she looked at me, crying, and said, "I'm not every teacher, and every teacher shouldn't have to go through this."

As I met with my chair and committee and discussed my research plans and what direction I was going, there was a tear, a rip, so-to-speak. That required my chair to become more transactional in her decision-making of resisting the status quo and upholding ytness as the standard, as my grandmother would say, *she had to put her money where her mouth was*- As I embodied Black Feminism as not only a framework but also a methodological approach submerged in complete contextual culture autonomy, she had to walk alongside me as a sista scholar and be willing to exchange knowledge as parallel and non-linear.

Grief….

Code-switching

As Black sista scholars, we often use code-switching as a necessary tool to access success in academia under the gaze of ytness. We are often in a sacred place of in-betweenness, *neptanla* (Anzaldua, 2007). We create a place of critical reflexivity where we are forced to protect that which is culturally authentic while also challenging normative ways. The culture of Whiteness seeps into every corner of our educational system and can be hard to name without a critical consciousness. It is not racism or White privilege alone, but a complexity of inequities that Ibram X Kendi (2019) states "is as visible as the law, or as hidden as our private thoughts" (p. 22). We talk about the existence of code-switching in the context of hair, dress, language, personality, and professionalism, but what about code-switching in research? My project was a narrative work of culture, a revolutionary act, and a literary quilt woven with Audre Lorde's linguistic trickster language, whose writing was to aid in transformation while simultaneously rooting and uprooting one's sense of self (Bartlow, 2009). The threads between the woven paths

of Zora Neal Hurston illuminated the connection between identity formation and resistance (Lauter, 1991; Omolade, 1994). To include Toni Morrison and Alice Walker's resistance to political and artistic issues and gender norms and Venus Evans Winters' resilience-building in qualitative research (Moore, 1984; Evans-Winters, 2019). As I embodied the completeness of a Black feminist methodological approach, I could not code-switch, *not this time.*

Grief…

The resistance was freedom but costly.

I often wondered what it was like to mentor the physicists who were bold enough to explore and discover aerodynamics or perhaps the educators bold enough to reimagine schooling that resisted the normative yt gaze of the dominant approach. To offer the freedom of discovery based on cultural context and not the banking system. Freire (2000) speaks to such liberatory pedagogy with his statement of "first, do no harm" (p. 3). To reimagine schooling, where students hold power and that learning is indeed an iterative process of student-teacher dialogue and action. My chair couldn't see past the gaze into such a bold, disruptive methodological approach, and I respected her for that and had to find someone who was willing to walk into uncharted territory to discover a new, more authentic way. I remembered the grief the teacher I mentored must have felt when I didn't guard against essentialism—making her channel through dangerous waters just because it was what every teacher had to do, supposedly. It is in this space of reckoning where hooks (1990) reminds us to remain vigilant in our critical consciousness so as to not perpetuate the cycle of oppression when we work alongside those within the margins. When we don't respect the journey of students' knowledge and their reconstruction of self, we commit harmful acts of self-perseverance and sustainability.

Grief…

Reconciled

Relearning the world as I contend with grief is reconciled. It is not definite or finished, yet reconciled with the understanding that there are spaces in grief where I have access to truth, freedom, and peace. This endarken space uses grief as a transformative power structure. I successfully defended my dissertation, *Becoming: A Poetic Narrative Inquiry of six Black Women Teachers in Rural North Carolina,* with the help of a new chair, daring herself, who was willing to take a risk on disruptive research that blurred lines of normality and challenged the dominant ways of knowing and doing. Research that reached through the audiences of academia back into the community.

Sage's Story

When I began my doctoral journey, I was a middle school science teacher teaching in rural North Carolina. I wanted to positively impact my community to allow the voices of underrepresented groups to be heard regarding the limited access to resources in the state's eastern region. When I began the program at UNCW, I immediately started to unpack the implicit bias I carry as a White, middle-class, cisgender, heterosexual woman and the privileges that I have had as a result of my identity. I also deconstructed how those privileges have impacted my experience as a student and educator in a system designed to favor my dominant identity and oppress my marginalized identity as a woman.

In our coursework, I began to unlearn damaging behaviors and practices as we went through transformative praxis, critical reflection, and cultural responsiveness. I knew that if I did not work to recognize the bias that impedes my ability to work alongside students, I would continue to be a part of the problem of marginalizing, discriminating, and excluding individuals who have been historically disregarded. I had a general idea of what equity meant going into this program, but I did not know what equity looked like in action. Throughout my coursework, I uncovered meaning and gained understanding by reading research and theory by Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color authors. As a White woman, I had good intentions, but I now understand that those good intentions were not enough. I learned that I am required to engage in critical reflection at every moment so as not to perpetuate exclusionary practices.

Throughout this journey, I have continued to push back, question, and wonder in my day-to-day life outside the program by asking how things can actually change and how I can make a difference. Through Human-Centered Design (IDEO, 2015) and Freire's (1970) problem-posing method, I was able to find practical ways to decenter myself as a White woman. In looking at these processes throughout my time in the program, I really saw that the answer to working towards radicalizing colonizing practices in K-12 public education in rural North Carolina was to engage in critical dialogue. We often hear phrases like "they deserve a seat at the table" or "we need to make room for them" in conversations, and that was not the case. I had to build relationships and bridges in healing and understanding for *me* to have a seat at the table of those who have been historically excluded and marginalized. It was never about making room at *my* table; it was about building relationships and understanding so I could be invited to a table at which I had never sat. If this process and program taught me anything, it taught me that working in diversity, equity, and inclusion is not the sole responsibility of individuals in marginalized communities. It is the responsibility of individuals with privileged identities to listen, talk less, and do our part daily to deconstruct oppressive barriers. This work is about the long-term impact we can sustain by decentering ourselves. It is comfortable for White people to remain at the surface of this work by asking how we can change things around us to make a difference when we genuinely must look at how we can change our viewpoints and actions. Change begins with us.

In considering cultural responsiveness, I knew that a traditional dissertation would not allow me to communicate authentically in this process. I learned throughout this program that demonstration and understanding of knowledge and growth could happen in a variety of ways, and I wanted my dissertation to be accessible beyond the scope of the Academy. This work was not meant to be turned in only for individuals in higher education to access and was not a checkbox for me. To have a community impact, I wanted to think about individuals who have access to students and staff in a non-evaluative way in a public school setting. The individuals who met those criteria were librarians/media coordinators. They are responsible for adding new books to the library and weeding old books. After selecting media coordinators for this project, I wanted to engage them in critical dialogue and problematization, as explained in Freire's (1970) problem-posing method, to visualize the radicalization of text selection processes for media centers in public schools in North Carolina. Instead of asking the participants a series of questions and thus centering myself, I co-constructed the research questions and topics with the participants. Then, we subsequently co-analyzed the themes that emerged from our critical dialogue before proceeding

with the remaining sessions. It was crucial that I design my research in this way due to the implicit bias I bring based on my lived experiences. Therefore, to maintain authenticity, I could not analyze conversational data without including the media coordinators.

Because of the four principles of the IDI, I used a multimedia approach to my work, including voice recordings, web design, mind mapping, visual displays, and text explanations. The multimedia approach allowed me to maintain the rigor of a traditional dissertation but in a way that was authentic to me, the participants, and the overall goal of this work which was to be accessible to everyone. However, pursuing this non-traditional process came with struggles. In the years of completing coursework prior to my dissertation, I unpacked many colonized methods that were teacher-centered. This teacher-centered approach to education is best described by Freire's (1970) banking method, where students are vessels, and teachers/instructors are responsible for sharing their knowledge with little input from students. With this way of teaching and learning, students are working toward earning grades where proficiency is arbitrarily determined by the instructor instead of co-constructing knowledge for growth.

Before my coursework at UNCW, I had never learned alongside my instructor as someone who had value to bring to the table based on the truth of my lived experiences. The majority of my instructors in my doctoral program placed value on student collaboration and demonstration of understanding and growth in a variety of ways. I went through this process of unlearning where assignments were varied, and I often worked with fellow students to collaborate and critically reflect. When I began my dissertation, I felt I was being forced back into the box I had worked hard to break out of by having to fit my research design within the constraints of a traditional dissertation. From my coursework on decolonization, cultural responsiveness, Human-Centered Design, and many other frameworks of thought, I learned that writing alone is not always culturally authentic to the individuals (in this case, my participants) with whom we work. I was fortunate that I could form a dissertation committee that trusted my process and valued my justification for pursuing the IDI. Despite their support, it was challenging to explain to others involved why it was culturally responsive to my participants that I presented our outcomes in a non-traditional way.

Pursuing the Inquiry Dissertation for Impact was absolutely worth it. I navigated the different stages of my journey with my colleague, Lavender, who was a critical friend and collaborative partner. No one assigned us this support system, but I attribute much of my success in completing the Inquiry Dissertation for Impact to the fact that I had a colleague who walked this journey with me.

EMERGING PATTERNS

Interpretive research (Erickson, 1986) and collective reflective conversations reveal patterns across the data that give way to our themes. We individually analyzed video data, identifying the patterns and themes. We later met to co-construct perspectives (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), identifying intersections across our findings. After multiple iterations of individual and collective coding and recoding, our analysis suggests three distinct themes of navigating the transition from student to doctoral candidates while embarking on an IDI journey. We name these themes: cultural authenticity, power of them academy, and theory vs. practice. Each section defines and presents evidence to support our themes. Moreover, we illuminated how each candidate, separately or together, navigated the dissonance between their research identities emerging from their coursework and traversing dissertation norms.

Cultural Authenticity

Cultural authenticity refers to how cultural systems create genuine realities that reflect a particular worldview. Cultural authenticity reveals the beliefs, values, and knowledge systems of those situated within the context, which is also associated with everyday life practices and languages.

Both Lavender and Sage's narratives show that each underwent an identity awareness, an awakening, if you will, of the hidden curriculum surrounding schools and society. Each discusses the recognition of their participation in institutions, self-growth, and shift in how they see their work in the world. Their emerging *cultural norm* includes autonomy to embrace the newly adopted practices developed within their course work. These practices include self-awareness, critical reflection, critical reflexivity, flexibility, and fluidity within an evolving and nonlinear process. In the dissertation stage, both candidates discuss their struggle for cultural authenticity. Sage recalls, "Within our coursework, each of us rediscovered ourselves after unlearning," moving naturally to critical reflection and critical reflexivity. As part of their "new natural," they employed practices that embodied revealing and pushing back on conventional thought and action. Student coursework and instructors afforded and supported their movement into this culture.

Nevertheless, as they moved to the dissertation stage, they met with conflicting messages from the institution and committee members. Though faculty had embraced and co-constructed the IDI, each responded to institutional gravity, revealing an adherence to academic tradition. This habit of maintaining the status quo leads us to the power of the academy.

Power of the Academy

We define the power of the academy as one that is asymmetrical power relations. The perpetuation of the institution's Eurocentric values and rational knowledge emerges during the dissertation process, reinforcing the status quo and causing conformity to a particular set of systemic expectations. In both cases, the candidates' dissertation products came under scrutiny, resulting in challenges to transcend this status quo.

For Lavender, the struggle was around gaining the support of her first chair to move forward with a dissertation approach that did not squarely fit within the bounds of what we professors underwent during our own process. Lavender experienced continued pressure from her chair to revert to and maintain normative structures regarding research. As part of the asymmetrical power relations, Lavender felt fear. If she pushed back, would there be retaliation? Her chair insisted that she reorganized the representation of research Lavender had built over months. A poetic approach that Lavender crafted was challenged as unacceptable since it did fall squarely in the admissible structure. Drawing upon Black Feminism and Venus Winters' effort to rename the normalized categories of the dissertation format, Lavender reached deeply into her own power and asserted her agency to refuse, to revolt. She shared with her advisor and, subsequently new chair, "I have not come this far to disrupt the process only to be put back in a box."

For Sage, the struggle was around herself and her pedagogy. Before the coursework, Sage had not had to ask about her privilege or the effects and impacts of colonization. Upon learning alongside

her instructors rather than under them, she came to see organic pedagogies that included voices from the field instead of imparting knowledge to them. Sage discussed reimagining her participation as decentered and relationship-building. Sage now looked to be invited to conversations instead of utilizing her White identity to hierarchically construct seats at the table for others. This new culture did not fit with what some of the committee members expected and the implied rules in graduate school to publish a completed dissertation. Her digital dissertation format was met with questions from within our department. Sage had spent semesters utilizing Miro, an online collaborative tool that affords non-linear brainstorming and collaborative construction of knowledge. As stated above, Sage searched for methods that would decenter herself through tools that would elevate her colleagues' knowledge, practices, and values. She crafted a website with intricate diagrams connecting the problem, theoretical foundations, and methods. Moreover, her images represented the emerging flow of conversations that led to the research findings. Her committee was unsettled with this approach. They stated, “She’s going to have to write something given that the graduate school has a set format for dissertation products.”

The internalized assumption imposed on faculty to reproduce knowledge and production norms inhibits all of us from imagining other possible forms of intellectual expression. As was the case for Lavender, Sage pushed back, working closely with her chair to transcend conventional expectations. The result for both was a dissertation artifact that was authentic to their culture, context, and self. During their dissertation experience, each stated that they had to remain “true to the rediscovery of self and then produce artifacts and work that are critical and authentic to us and our learning styles.”

Theory vs. Practice

We define theory vs. practice as an arbitrary dichotomy created to divide those working with their head and those working with their hands. This age-old Plato/Aristotle debate fabricates a perceived value on academically acquired knowledge over manual labor and craftsmanship.

Both candidates adopted a synergy philosophy between theory and practice during their coursework. Each assert that their coursework drew heavily on critical theories, particularly questioning power, ideology, and discourse. However, critical theories did not directly or immediately translate when embarking on the dissertation process. The inertia of the institution’s commitment to theory over practice surprised these candidates, so much so that in the initial stages of their process, each felt obligated to separate theory from practice. (Un)learning in their coursework disrupted their understanding of engagement with their communities. Rather than entering armed with academic authority, each learned to humbly enter inquiry by respecting practice as equal to theory.

The candidates resisted such a separation. Lavender adopted a metaphor to inform her approach, and Sage quickly abandoned her attempts to conform to a linear process. Together, they assert that theory without practice and practice without theory would imply a dichotomy. Separating research and practice would reproduce a hierarchy where Lavender and Sage would hold authoritative knowledge. Lavender refers to this as a disservice to the emerging cultural authenticity they persistently and steadfastly worked to sustain. Sage states, “We wanted to create something that was accessible to people outside the Academy, aiming for immediate and profound impact.” In these expressions, Lavender and Sage underscore that their work was not simply for the academy; it was for their contexts. Lavender shared:

> …We could reach across the Academy to my community of BWT (Black Women Teachers) and they would feel agency with what they were reading and listening to. It was something that had to be done to sustain the validity of a BWT and continue the uplift. It is there–they find a space where they were not invisible and then they regain their power with their voice. I had to do something that was authentic to me that could sustain me and my participants –they needed to know that it is okay to be a BWT where you are with your ways of knowing, doing, and performing…

Sage’s embraced community knowledge, drawing on collective and critical theories. She created engagements that promoted equitable contributions, foregrounding community wisdom and lived experiences. Each author bridges theory and practice to center collective knowledge, the knowledge that emerges from those on the ground.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study underscore the need for a transformative approach in higher education that values the multiplurisitiy of students (e.g., language, ways of knowing, social positioning, etc.). One that is also responsive to students' funds and emerging sources of knowledge.

In particular, the implications point to significant opportunities for curricular reform, pedagogical innovation, and institutional responsibility. As global and local contexts evolve, there is a growing recognition that traditional, Eurocentric epistemologies are insufficient for addressing the complexities of contemporary society. Scholars such as Smith (1999), Battiste (2013), and Bhattacharya (2016) have long argued for the decolonization of curricula, advocating for the incorporation of Indigenous and non-Western perspectives to foster a more holistic and inclusive educational experience.

Additionally, Freire's (1970) concept of liberatory pedagogy challenges the traditional, hierarchical models of education, emphasizing the need for teaching methods that engage students through multiple modalities and foster critical thinking. This shift towards non-linear, student-centered pedagogies aligns with hooks' (1994) call for education as a practice of freedom, where participatory learning environments enable students to become active agents in their learning process.

Furthermore, even through the contentious times of diversity, equity, and inclusion, the study highlights the university's role in supporting a democratic society, not only through knowledge production but by cultivating critical consciousness and social responsibility among students (Giroux, 2011).

However, these shifts also bring challenges, particularly when institutional norms resist change. The tension between innovative approaches and the normative expectations of academia may necessitate ongoing advocacy for the acceptance and institutionalization of alternative scholarly practices (Ahmed, 2012). These implications collectively call for a reimagining of higher education that challenges the status quo and fosters a more socially just academic environment.

DISCUSSION

In this article, we present two doctoral students' transitions from student to doctoral candidate. Lavender's and Sage's experiences enable us to inform how we navigate our transition from a traditional dissertation to an innovative one that purposefully prioritizes community engagement, local knowledge, and participant agency. We close with a manuscript with lessons learned and recommendations for future students/advisors.

Through our themes of cultural authenticity, power of the academy, and theory vs. practice, we discuss our lessons learned. Specifically, the primary obstacles infiltrating each candidate's ability to transcend normative dissertation expectations lie without our institution's willingness to also (un)learn. Our engagement in critical consciousness and critical reflexivity will enable us to ask why we habitually hold tightly to what counts as scholarship. Engaging in conversations to challenge historical norms brings new possibilities and acceptance of multiple forms of scholarship.

Lavender and Sage provide us with future recommendations. Each asks that chairs and students set ground rules for flexibility and ideological framing. First, faculty embarking on new forms of scholarship are on a progressive continuum of liberatory practices, operating from an untenable conflict between academic freedom and linear processes and performances. Second, chairs put trust in the candidate's developing voice and process. Lavender and Sage gained the tools to navigate uncertainty and emergence, yet felt their chairs or committee members did not always hold faith in their abilities. When either piece of advice becomes uncomfortable for chairs and committee members, our authors ask that each grapple with her own positionalities and the unconscious ways in which they perpetuate normative practices and knowledge production.

Lavender's and Sage's final words are as follows:

When we began this study, we hadn't intended for it to branch into a taxonomy of butterflies, figuratively speaking. Imagining the student as the cultural category and the dissertation type being morphed into however the student comes into their discipline. We began to see cultural categories that overlapped with traditional paper-based writing, digital media, poetry, and creative writing, depending on the authenticity of the student. As students and researchers, we mirrored Freire's liberatory approach and embodied the culturally sustaining praxis to student-centered learning by taking control of our own ways of knowing, learning, and performing research (Freire, 1970; Paris & Alim, 2017). We created our dissertations to own our learning and showed our knowledge and how we theorized–performance-based–performative dissertation.

Our dissertations were a disruptive performance because we were performing and writing research in a way that was culturally authentic to us–the way we practiced in the coursework phase of the program. Programs foster collaboration, decolonization, transformation, etc., and then are expected to work solo for the dissertation. As we rediscover the purposes of education and the reimagining of the dissertation process, we should always begin with the thought of how academic systems repeat and perpetuate epistemological violence towards marginalized populations, creating cyclic barriers to success. In hook's (1999) examination of historical institutions of domination in the US, she states, "Cultures of domination rely on the cultivation of fear as a way to ensure obedience" (p. 93). A sure way to continue with dominant ways of knowing and doing, academic institutions perpetuate this fear as faculty chairs' pedagogical praxis reifies oppression and mentors students with no liberating methods.

The act of critical love, where love is (re) conceptualized as a form of resistance in order to demand social transformation (Brooks, 2017) while also learning to love across differences (hooks, 1999), is a sure method of such liberating practice. Institutions must begin to shift the power of normality and Western epistemologies to create space for research that challenges and resists such normative structures, centers students' experiences, and co-creates rehumanizing practices that heal, restore, and create wholeness (Brooks, 2017). It is possible to bridge the gap.

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