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Fostering Student Success Through Effective Mentorship:

Insights from Award-Winning Education Doctorate Dissertations

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the mentoring relationship between EdD students and their dissertation chairs who won the CPED Dissertation in Practice of the Year Award. Utilizing the CPED Mentoring and Advising Skills to frame the study, we interviewed 16 mentees and mentors. Thematic analysis pointed to broad mentorship themes of creating a culture of care, providing meaningful feedback, and modeling writing as a genre. This study has implications for practice for faculty chairing dissertation in practice, students, and doctoral program administrators.

KEYWORDS

doctoral mentoring, EdD, culture of care, feedback, academic writing support

Brown et al. (2020) defined mentorship within the EdD as a "mutually beneficial relationship between scholar-practitioners in the field of education that does not adhere to the typical tiered approach, but rather supports readiness, self-efficacy, and progress by providing sustained support and networking opportunities to achieve the participants' desired outcomes" (p. 21). Research confirms there is a direct relationship between the overall doctoral student experience and the quality of how they were mentored throughout the process (Baker et al., 2013; Esposito et al., 2017). Likewise, poor mentorship can negatively impact students' self-efficacy, productivity, and mental health (Al Makhamreh & Stockley, 2020; Levecque et al., 2017).

Despite the clear benefits of inserting explicit mentorship programming into the doctoral experience (Lowery, 2018), few programs are guided by either a theory of mentorship (Crisp & Cruz, 2009) or a mentoring framework (see Brown et al., 2020). This is complicated by the fact that "everyone thinks they know what mentoring is" (Eby et al., 2007, p. 7). This mentality may create an underlying premise that mentorship is automatically and successfully embedded into doctoral programs simply through the existence of a dissertation advisor.

Moreover, it is often assumed that graduate students are autonomous and already know what to do upon entering their program, which lessens the degree to which mentorship is emphasized (Thomas et al., 2015). Further, Lunsford et al. (2017) determined that while there is a significant institutional focus on undergraduate student mentorship, graduate mentorship is often presumed as engrained in the process. However, due to the high demand for dissertation supervisors many faculty are catapulted into the role of dissertation chair and are expected to hit the ground running with little guidance or even expertise on how to do this well. This is fueled by the assumption that mentors already know what to do (Creighton et al., 2010; Manathunga & Goozée, 2007).

This study therefore aimed to illuminate considerations for mentoring best practices to better support student success in doctoral programs. It examined the mentorship relationship of student-mentor partnerships who have won or chaired a Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) *Dissertation in Practice (DiP) of the Year Award*. The study was guided by the following research question:

> How do mentors and mentees of CPED DiP award winners articulate essential elements of their mentoring experiences?

For the purpose of this study, we use the terms "mentor" and "mentee" and broadly discuss the interactions between the two as mentorship. However, we do not intend for the terms to be exclusive and recognize that faculty who oversee the dissertation process may define their roles differently depending on their program, e.g., advisor, chair.

Centering Students' Well-Being

Within the literature, student well-being is a common theme (Al Makhamreh & Stockley 2020; Esposito et al., 2017). In a study of over 3,500 PhD students across disciplines, Levecque et al. (2017) reported that doctoral students frequently "experience psychological

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distress" including depression, stress, unhappiness, and sleeping issues (p. 877). They found that the high demands of the doctorate caused a detrimental impact on over 90% of students' mental health. Doctoral students often question their sense of belonging, self-worth, and capabilities to do doctoral level work.

Posselt (2018) reported high levels of imposter syndrome in doctoral students, which was best mitigated through a growth mindset approach. When mentors reframed success and failure as part of the learning process, students felt a greater sense of belonging. Posselt noted, however, that their participants were also reluctant to initially turn to faculty for mentorship and support. Doctoral students want to be pushed to grow while also needing simultaneous affirmation (Al Makhamreh & Stockley, 2020). Roberts and Ferro-Almeida (2019) conceptualized this balance as *tough love mentoring theory*. Building a culture of trust through mentorship creates a safe space for students to be vulnerable and fail on their way to success.

A strong mentoring presence is a related key factor in supporting student well-being (Woolderink, et al., 2015). Findings from Levecque et al. (2017) revealed that student well-being improved with mentors who were more involved with their students and who possessed an "inspirational leadership style." Conversely, mentors who had a "laissez-faire leadership style" produced a significant increase in psychological distress (p. 875). Students who felt seen, heard, and engaged with, reported positive mentoring experiences.

Humanistic Mentoring

Cruz et al. (2020) described humanistic mentoring as based in "reciprocity, mutuality, and empathy in the mentor/mentee relationship" (p. 104). Humanizing the doctorate involves building relationships and mutual understanding while caring for the whole student beyond their academic program. Roberts and Ferro-Almeida (2019) referred to this interpersonal mentorship quality as *benevolence* and Esposito et al. (2017) instead likened it to mothering within a pedagogy of love and home. They spoke of doctoral mentorship being located "at the crossroads of mothering as the work of support, protection, and care where [students] may have found little otherwise; and of home as a place of understanding, familiarity, and guidance in a challenging environment" (p. 161).

Mentors also need to demonstrate a humanistic nature where they present themselves as real people and in doing so create authenticity in showing interest for their students (Martin et al., 2021; Woolderink, et al., 2015). Cruz et al. (2020) used reciprocal storytelling to share personal stories that humanize the traditional student/teacher roles. Singe et al. (2021) instead highlighted having an open-door policy where students feel welcomed and invited to talk to their mentor. Research adds that frequent check-ins through a variety of communication styles proved to be the most successful for building relationships (Brown et al., 2020; Hauth et al., 2024).

Research suggests that mentors should intentionally acknowledge the challenges and struggles that students face in balancing their lives with their academic program. Esposito et al. (2017) noted that students have "need for a learning space that allows the negotiation of real-life struggles during the doctoral process" (p. 170). Moreover, when mentors do not notice or acknowledge the challenges facing doctoral students, students feel ignored and their well-being is negatively impacted (Al Makhamreh & Stockley, 2020).

Mentorship Best Practices

Yob and Crawford's (2012) review of the mentorship literature identified both academic and psychosocial attributes of successful mentors for doctoral programs. These mentor attributes included competence, availability, induction, challenge personal qualities, communication, and emotional support. Building on Yob and Crawford, Brown et al. (2020) developed the Mentoring Pathways Program Model (MPPM) to reframe their EdD program. However, they departed from Yob and Crawford's single framework after recognizing that their students needed variation in mentorship at different points in their doctoral program. Findings from a series of related studies involving the impact of this MPPM have highlighted that the combination of academic and psychosocial support at different levels of study supports student success (Geesa et al., 2018; Geesa et al., 2022). Geesa et al. (2020) further found that students benefited from mentor-led induction in terms of learning about the dissertation process, resources, and work/life balance.

The CPED (2024) organization also includes a set of nine Mentoring and Advising (M&A) skills within their existing framework to support doctoral preparation of educators. Outlined in Table 1, the M&A skills are intended to conceptually guide EdD programs as part of the larger CPED Framework.

Table 1. CPED Mentoring and Advising Framework

Guiding Skills	Definition
1. Equity and justice	that fosters responsive mentoring regardless of age, ability, ethnicity, culture, race, religion, gender, or identity;
2. Mutual respect	that ensures students, advisers, and mentors are respected for their practical knowledge and understanding of research and inquiry; each capable of providing guidance and support to advance everyone's ability to apply mutually constructed knowledge across a variety of practical and theoretical contexts;
3. Dynamic learning	that provides open communication, critical friendships, and peer-to-peer support with reciprocal interactions and responsibilities that form a community of learners inclusive of adviser, mentor, and peer relationships;
4. Flexibility	that allows mentoring/advising to occur by all program faculty, in students' work contexts, and in their available time;
5. Intellectual space	that supports students' professional passions and needs by expanding their use of scholarship, inquiry, professional knowledge, and technology (when appropriate) to address problems;
6. Support and safe learning environments	that are developmental, directed, growth-oriented, team-oriented, and scaffolded so students are mentored/advised from the beginning of to the end of their programs while demonstrating an understanding of the needs of the adult learner;
7. Cohort and individualized attention	that centralizes students' needs and problems of practice in learning while valuing the practitioner student as unique;
8. Rigorous	practices that set high expectations through a shared sense of responsibility and accountability and offer challenges for students to conduct inquiry as practice aimed at improvement and the development of new knowledge;
9. Integration	that aligns with adult learner needs while reflecting a program's values, norms, and the CPED Framework (The CPED Framework, para 12).

Recognizing the need to operationalize the framework, CPED also introduced an M&A Skills assessment tool. The tool provides an actionable self-assessment for EdD faculty to reflect on and determine gaps in their mentoring skills.

RESEARCH DESIGN

To explore the phenomena of mentoring, we adopted CPED's nine M&A Skills to conceptually frame this study (see Table 1). By considering the perspectives of dissertation award winners and their mentors, in conversation with the M&A Skills, we could better understand how the M&A skills were actualized on their journey to produce an award-winning dissertation. We conducted a qualitative interview study (Weiss, 1995) to best focus on the multiple perspectives of the mentorship dyads. Through in-depth interviews with each participant, we would be able to develop a composite understanding of interrelated best practices in doctoral mentorship from both the mentors' and mentees' perspectives.

We came to this inquiry through our positionality as EdD faculty mentors and prior experiences as doctoral mentees. Each of the three researchers had direct experience mentoring doctoral students and as such were invested in wanting to better understand what mentorship looked like for successful dissertations. We not only recognized the impact of our dual experiences as both mentors and mentees as an interpretive lens, but we reflexively leaned into these experiences to help us make connections across our data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Throughout the study, we continually questioned how our subjectivity shaped our interpretive process to ensure we were also looking for unexpected and new conceptions.

Participants

Using purposeful sampling, we recruited participants from the body of CPED DiP Award winners extending back to its inception in 2012. The yearly CPED DiP award reflects a high-quality dissertation written either by an individual EdD doctoral student or a team of EdD students. The dissertation chair is also recognized for their efforts. Using the CPED database to identify the award winners and mentors, we emailed participants directly to invite them to participate in this study. This study included a total of 16 respondents: eleven doctoral students who we refer to as mentees and five dissertation chairs who we refer to as mentors. To provide anonymity, we did not differentiate participants by team or individual dissertations, nor did we filter participation by specific chairs in connection with their associated students. Gender-neutral pseudonyms are used throughout this study for gender anonymity and overall confidentiality. For clarity within this study, individuals who served as mentors are referred to with the Dr. title, e.g. Dr. Moore. Participants who were in the mentee role as doctoral students are referred to by first name despite having since graduated and being doctors themselves.

Data Collection and Analysis

We engaged in individual semi-structured interviews using tailored protocols approved by our Institutional Review Board (IRB): one for mentees and one for mentors. Interviews lasted 60 minutes on average and were conducted, recorded, and transcribed via Zoom. Transcripts were then uploaded into NVivo for qualitative data organization and analysis.

Table 2. CPED Mentoring and Advising Framework & Qualitative Findings

Guiding Principle	Categories & Subcategories	Themes
1. Equity and justice	Building Personal Relationships Emotional Support Intersectional Identities Validation	Culture of Care
2. Mutual respect	Building Personal Relationships Humanizing the Experience Developing Metacognitive Skills Show Over Tell Co-constructing	Culture of Care Meaningful Feedback Learning a New Genre
3. Dynamic learning	Building Personal Relationships Including families Balanced High Expectations Meaningful Feedback "Think of It as a Gift" Developing Metacognitive Skills Show Over Tell	Culture of Care Meaningful Feedback Learning a New Genre
4. Flexibility	Balanced High Expectations Recognizing students' outside lives	Culture of Care
5. Intellectual space	Building Personal Relationships "Think of It as a Gift" Developing Metacognitive Skills Show Over Tell	Culture of Care Meaningful Feedback Learning a New Genre
6. Support and safe learning environments	Building Personal Relationships Emotional Support "Developing Metacognitive Skills" Show Over Tell	Culture of Care Meaningful Feedback Learning a New Genre
7. Cohort and individualized attention	Building Personal Relationships Individualized Feedback	Culture of Care Meaningful Feedback
8. Rigorous	Balanced Expectations "Think of It as a Gift" Developing Metacognitive Skills Show Over Tell	Culture of Care Meaningful Feedback Learning a New Genre
9. Integration	Building Personal Relationships Including Families Balanced High Expectations Meaningful Feedback "Think of It as a Gift" Developing Metacognitive Skills Show Over Tell	Culture of Care Meaningful Feedback Learning a New Genre

Our analysis began with an interview-memoing process. Following each interview, the team engaged in collaborative memoing where the lead interviewer would relay salient moments from their interview and the team would then discuss thoughts and connections. Upon conclusion of all the interviews, we then began thematically analyzing our data using both deductive and inductive coding strategies. Our deductive codes were formulated from our initial connections stemming from our memoing process. As an example, we derived the in vivo code "culture of care" during one of our post-interview memoing sessions. In discussion about what the participant had stated, the research team all had related connections to add from their previous interviews. As we coded, we also

inductively looked for new concepts, patterns, and anomalies such as “surprised humanity.” We met regularly for interrater reliability and coding refinement. We collaboratively reduced our codes into themes based on noticed patterns and we continued to refine our themes into our synchronous writing sessions. In a final review of the data, we reflexively discussed our interpretations in reaction to the M&A Skills and our positionality as EdD mentors and previous doctoral mentees. Table 2 displays how the researchers cross-compared their categories and themes with the CPED M&A Skills to provide a visual representation of the overlapping concepts.

FINDINGS

The following thematic findings highlight a broad mentorship mindset of interpersonal care and responsiveness mixed with intellectual growth and academic rigor. Both mentors and mentees framed dissertation success within this balance of care, high expectations, and scaffolded support.

Culture of Care

Working within a culture of care was a predominant theme across both mentees and mentors. Participants highlighted the importance of not only being present and invested in the mentees work but focused on a more holistic valuing of the mentee. Both sets of participants repeatedly expressed how important it was to recognize and support students as whole people. Dr. Moore explained how they “create a space for students to be seen for their intersectional identities and to be recognized and validated” and how important it was to support how their mentees “exist in all aspects of their life, not just in this doctoral program.” Dr. Moore added,

> I think my students understand that I value knowing who they are as a person. I know which of my students had a house renovation. I know which of my students had to bury her father in the program. I know which of my students changed jobs several times in the program with a period of being unemployed.

Jackie felt humanized as not just another student in the mill, but as a whole person whose life experiences mattered. Jackie explained, “My chair built a culture of care, by publicly acknowledging and helping to develop the individual strengths of their students...They believed every doctoral student matters, every doctoral student has a gift.” Both Alex and Casey discussed how it “had everything to do with feeling accepted and worthy” and “that you are actually worthwhile and valued.”

Building Personal Relationships

Establishing interpersonal connections were likewise important. The mentors worked intentionally to create space for relationship building, which was both unexpected and appreciated by mentees. Dr. Campbell valued “building relationships early on” through regular meetings every couple of weeks and to share their own experiences with them for authenticity and relationality. Dr. Campbell added, “I know their family now and they know my family.” Dr. Wilson encouraged community-building through events like potlucks and croquet tournaments to get to know their students while also providing space to “make the student feel connected and know there was support for them.” Dr. Evans added, “I know all my students very, very well. I can tell you anything you want to know about their complex lives.”

Dr. Hart felt it was paramount to not only acknowledge their mentees’ lives outside the doctorate, but to then be responsive to their needs in that capacity. Dr. Hart stated,

> I’ll meet with students over the weekend if that’s when they’re free…for example, it’s very hard for an elementary school principal to be engaged in the work during the school day…so if I can spend time during the weekends to help my students get it done, I’ll do it.

Dr. Hart felt that by meeting regularly with their mentee, they were able to build a relationship of care and support. They added that their mentee “pushed themselves harder because of our relationship…we both have a deep respect for each other.” This responsiveness was not without its challenges as Dr. Hart’s own workload could at times prevent them from being as responsive as they preferred.

The intentionality of mentors to build authentic relationships was felt by students who highlighted how pivotal it was in their dissertation journey. Cameron explained, “that feeling of personal connection made it easier because I felt like my chair cared about me and my work. My chair felt like a friend to me, who wanted me to be successful.” Personal connections and care made the process more manageable. Cameron further expressed surprise at having their mentor also show interest in their family.

> I had young sons at the time and there were times we’d be on a call and my [kids] were just going crazy, but my chair was really cool…and would talk to them. And when I had my defense, they actually came…And just think about it! Just that ease of knowing I could bring my family to the defense–I really felt connected to my chair.

The mentees felt more supported when their chairs took the time to get to know about their personal lives and families. This was unexpected, and it made them feel valued.

Emotional Support

The culture of care was especially noticeable when mentors went beyond just building relationships and were responsive to their emotional needs. Dr. Moore explained, “I held on to my commitment to prioritize students' wellness in this journey and pause when we need to pause and push when we need to go.” Dr. Moore felt it was important to normalize the feelings that arose so that students understood that it’s okay and even expected.

As with the other contributing components to this culture of care, each of the mentees talked about these instrumental moments with an air of surprise and how it was unexpected that their professors would treat them with humanity and give them grace when they needed it. Dominique, for example, emphasized how “phenomenal” it was that their chair cared for them and explained,

> It was a very pivotal moment for me, and honestly, it just solidified what I already knew: that my chair cared about me as a person, and wasn't just trying to get me through a system…It’s pretty phenomenal that they knew that that's what I needed at that time, and that she wasn’t so stuck in the roles of formality that she couldn't see my humanity.

When students felt their mentors recognized their struggles in the moment, it encouraged them to keep going. Jackie echoed this same sentiment when describing a low point when their life responsibilities almost caused them to quit entirely. Jackie said,

> I totally broke down. I told my chair I was going to quit. I said, I can't do it. I can't take care of my kids and my dad and continue this dissertation process. I just felt very overwhelmed.

> And they just listened. I took [the withdrawal] to their office and they said, hold on to that. Let's just not do it today. Let's wait on this. And so, it was because of my chair that I stayed in. Without them I would not have stayed in the program.

This emotional support was also shared by Quinn who likened it to coaching and said that it helped when their mentor would encourage them by saying, "you can do this, you've got this."

Robin likewise expressed the impact of being able to say, "I need a moment." Indeed, when their mother passed away during their program, it was significant to Robin that their mentor said, "take the time off." Their mentor then rescheduled their one-on-meetings to help them get back on track. Robin referred to this moment in their program as a key example of how their chair supported and cared for their emotional health.

A few mentors, however, felt they had to prioritize academic success over emotional support. While Dr. Evans felt that it was important to show their students that they cared about their successes, when it came down to being an emotional cheerleader, Dr. Evans did not have the bandwidth or time to take on that level of support. Instead, they saw their role more as the academic supporter. Dr. Evans said,

> I wouldn't say ignoring emotions, but I don't have time for the emotional part of this. And I do understand that it's a big part of what's happening, but ideally, as a chair, I think I should be paying more attention to imposter syndrome and [helping] that academic anxiety.

Dr. Evans clarified, however, that their stance on emotional cheerleading did not mean they did not care and in fact, they would ideally build up the "emotional relational piece" if they had more time and bandwidth. Still, Dr. Evans did stress the importance of building relationships and getting to know their mentees. Dr. Wilson acknowledged that they understood the challenge that students faced with balancing graduate study and full-time work, but it was their job to support them through their academic work. They continued, "it's really easy for them to say, 'oh, I'll do that stuff next week or the week after' because their jobs are demanding, and their families are demanding. But my job isn't to look out for their jobs or families." Dr. Wilson re-emphasized that their job was to look out for the student to complete their program.

Balanced High Expectations

Within this culture of care, mentors frequently coupled care with high expectations. Dr. Wilson described their approach as "lots of pushing with lots of support." Adrian similarly used the word pushing to describe how important it was to be challenged within a supportive environment. They described their mentor as "tough, but fair" and added,

> I would say the ideal relationship is one where you receive encouragement, but also constructive guidance. Because you don't really want a mentor that just tells you great things all the time you want someone to help you grow. It's a balance between pushing you and not necessarily pulling you but encouraging you.

Mentees appreciated feeling challenged and knowing that their mentors had high goals of increased knowledge, ability, and overall improvement. Dr. Moore described how a mentee asked "to hold them to the highest bars of excellence throughout the process" because they wanted to create a dissertation that would be important and impactful. Devon used the phrase "gentle persistence" whereas Quinn talked about it as a "sweet spot." Quinn emphasized the importance of being a cheerleader, but also being direct and straightforward while upholding the rigor of the program:

> It's that sweet spot where you're pushing them, but you're not pushing them over the cliff yet, you know, so you're getting them right up to the edge and they might not feel totally comfortable, but they feel supported and they feel like it's possible to do whatever it is that that needs to be done.

Marion added,

> It's kind of like good parenting. Right? It's being able to say, 'I love you, but that's never going to fly.' It's that balance of respect, challenge, and empowerment. It's like them saying, 'Recognize where your weaknesses are. You've got it and I'm gonna be here to pull you up if you fall. But you're gonna have to be willing to push yourself beyond where you've been comfortable.' So, it's that real kind of back-and-forth balance of encouragement, support, and push back when necessary.

Overall, mentors and mentees alike highlighted how the most impactful support in the program was tethered to compassion and understanding. Recognizing students as whole people who were not immune to emotional distress, resonated with the mentees and helped them persevere. It was equally important to know that their mentors were invested in their academic success and were not going to let them slide even when it was tough.

Meaningful Feedback

Meaningful feedback emerged as the second overall theme in this study where participants emphasized the vital role feedback played in advancing the dissertation writing process. This included the early stages of conceptualizing their research studies to finishing their work in the final defense. Both mentors and mentees highlighted that being challenged, having space for reflection, and emphasizing a focus on metacognition made the feedback more effective and meaningful. The participants frequently discussed the importance of being challenged to think deeper about their studies, examine their work through multiple lenses, and improve their writing beyond what their expectations.

"Think of It as a Gift"

Some mentors spoke to how they intentionally created a positive feedback mindset to prepare their students. They wanted students to understand that it would not be a congratulatory 'one and done' single effort, nor would it always feel good in the process. Instead, feedback would be an iterative process of continual rethinking and rewriting. Reframing it lessened the sting. Dr. Evans explained that it was important to create a feedback mindset early on where students understand how to make sense of the feedback that were to receive:

> So, we have conversations before they start to get feedback from me. I tell them, let me tell you about how I'm going to give you feedback. And I also share, like when I get feedback myself, look at what I'm getting back. Like, I want you to get over a lot is bad, like a lot is not bad…we do some mindset kinds of conversations…we talk to them about the feedback process and how you're not going to submit this once you get feedback and be done. That's not how it works. It's going to be several iterations, and everyone is going to be stronger.

Dr. Wilson also discussed setting clear feedback expectations:

> they've already been warned ahead of time that they are going to get huge amounts of feedback on their papers. I give just a ton of feedback both in editing and in questions…I sort of warn them, don't be put off by this. Think of it as a gift.

This positive reframing enabled mentees to see it as an opportunity for growth. Adrian explained how important it was for their mentor to "Just being willing to be honest with us, you know, giving us feedback that helped us to grow." Quinn added that while it was oftentimes a painful process because they just "wanted it to be done," it was so important for their mentor to push them "to go beyond." Robin understood the feedback as a means for continuous improvement: "There was always feedback for me to look at it from a critical lens, and also through the improvement science phase. So, it was very much aligned."

In addition to preparing students to engage with feedback early on, this feedback mindset helped mentees be open to looking at their work through different lenses and to improve their writing process. Dr. Evans understood how "overwhelming" rejection was and therefore also made sure to communicate how they reframed rejection in their own work.

> I do some modeling of my own work. If I get something back… some rejections…I'm like, 'Look, you want to see what they said about me. Look at these. These are terrible, right? Right. Yes, my feelings are hurt, too. But if I can get over my feelings for a minute, and I look, it's really not all that bad. Like everything they're saying is really going to help me strengthen it. So no, I don't get to resubmit it there. They're not giving me that option. But I get to take this feedback and use it in a new outlet then.' And, and [my student] was like, 'it's like free advice' and I'm like, 'That's the spirit. Right? Think of it that way.'

Explicitly reframing feedback as an improvement tool helped to establish a growth mindset while also creating a safe learning environment where students would expect constructive criticism as a gift for success rather than an attack on their ability.

Developing Metacognitive Skills

The participants highlighted a balance between being descriptive and direct, but also reflective and metacognitive in nature. Dr. Campbell referred to it as "being messy" and explained how important it was for students to be okay with following a tangent to help them think deeper. Jackie said, "My chair forced me to be reflective of my work. They didn't tell me what to do, they instead created a space for me to come to the conclusions." Jackie added,

> So, it was never you need to change this, or this doesn't make sense. It was always, 'why are you thinking of going this way with it? It was always asking questions, what do you think?' And now I look back, and I'm like, okay, the questions were guiding me to do better.

Devon referred to it as digging deeper. They said, "my mentor would ask me appropriate questions to get me thinking…They challenged me…those questions were necessary in the process to help me think more deeply or dig a little bit deeper." On a whole, the participants appreciated learning how to think about their thinking, how to take a step back and reflect on the meaning-making process through their research and writing. The metacognitive and reflective feedback they received fostered their intellectual inquiry and growth as scholars.

Learning a New Genre

The third overall theme highlighted writing as a scaffolded process with the understanding that it was a new genre to most students. Indeed, students felt most successful when their mentors did not assume they already knew what to do. Alex was appreciative of learning the nuts and bolts "because you're doing it for the first time." Devon added, "You know, I thought I was a good writer, but dissertation writing is different. There's a learning curve and I was out of school for 15 years." The mentors also spoke to this same learning curve. Dr. Hart framed it as code-switching between genres. They explained, "Our students are mid-career professionals. And so sometimes the difficulty is they've not had to write something large for a long time, or they're used to writing memos, and they're switching their language."

Alex described how their chair would introduce the technical components of the genre by working through a written section together: "We just spent time on one paragraph to discuss how the technical aspects of dissertation writing are very different from everyday professional writing." Adrian recalled, "I remember sitting in their office, and my chair was like, you know, you have a really nice flow to your writing. But you need to make sure that your voice isn't so much of a heavy piece in your work that the reader misses your point, because it's too casual sometimes." Dr. Evans described breaking the writing down for students so they could better understand how the "puzzle pieces" go together. They explained, "What do you think your topic sentence is for this? What data points could we put in here? You know, kind of help them put the puzzle pieces together." The participants broadly communicated how impactful it was for the mentors to recognize that their students were learning a new way of writing and to actually provide the space to teach them about it.

Show Over Tell

Within this learning space, modeling also proved to be an essential support system. Dr. Evans explained that "everyone's hungry for examples" and providing modeling within the genre, helped them grow. They stated,

> An ideal situation is when you share a vision, and then the student takes that and puts it into practice. But the reality is that not all of our students are able to do that, you know? Some of them need more guidance and structure.

Some mentors modeled their own writing so that students could see the difference and understand what they needed to do through examples. Dr. Hart explained, "If I see they have writing challenges, I model something for them, and they now take and redo the rest following this model." Adrian echoed Dr. Hart by saying that when they wrote something that did not work, it was important that their mentor was first "willing to tell me that" and secondly, they would "help me by giving an example of how they would rewrite what I had written." Alex described how their mentor also engaged in a showing versus telling approach. At one point, they rewrote the whole paragraph and said 'Here's yours. Here's mine, what do you notice that's different?' Alex believed that this scaffolding contributed to their learning progress:

> That set me up for success … otherwise, I would have kept making the same sort of mistakes and kept writing with the wrong tone. And then it would have been a much lengthier uglier process. But my chair understood that this was where I

> needed the learning. They were aware that I'd never done this and that this is a very different kind of writing.

Devon agreed that students crave examples and would have liked more modeling themselves. It was important to students that their mentors not only met them where they were at in the learning process but also provided supportive structures, resources, and examples to help them successfully navigate the new-to-them scholarly writing process.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this qualitative study confirm previous research suggesting a significant relationship between mentoring and doctoral student success (Esposito et al., 2017; Levecque et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2021). Both mentees and mentors within the DiP award-winning dyads emphasized the impact of mentorship on the student's success in completing a high-quality dissertation in addition to contributing to their sense of self-efficacy in their program. While a few mentors downplayed the impact of their role, instead highlighting the prowess of students as their own driving force towards success, there were strong overlapping broad themes when compared to the CPED M&A Skills as displayed in Table 2. Our findings highlight specific areas that extend and provide further insight into the framework.

Greater Emphasis on Care

The participants in this study overwhelmingly centered care at the core of mentorship, which is not entirely unexpected given the significant research emphasizing students' well-being within their doctoral experiences (Al Makhamreh & Stockley 2020; Levecque et al., 2017). However, this umbrella nature of care within our findings departs slightly from existing frameworks that present a more equal or balanced focus between the psychosocial and academic components of mentoring (CPED, 2024; Yob & Crawford, 2012). Indeed, while the CPED M&A framework implicitly alludes to care across multiple skills (e.g., mutual respect, flexibility, supportive and safe learning environments), it is less explicit than what was highlighted by our participants. For these successful mentees and mentors, care was the culture that underpinned DiP success.

These findings coincided with literature that highlighted humanizing the doctorate and acknowledging students as whole people (Cruz et al., 2020; Singe et al., 2021), establishing connections and building relationships beyond the siloed student-advisor role (Geesa et al., 2020; Hauth et al. 2024), providing emotional support while also acknowledging struggle (Al Makhamreh & Stockley, 2020; Esposito et al., 2017), and holding high expectations coupled with warmth and affirmation (Posselt, 2018; Roberts & Ferro-Almeida, 2019). Each of the mentors also worked hard to create an atmosphere of support and engaged presence (Levecque et al., 2017) that included being responsive to their mentees either in reference to their life challenges or their academic progress and establishing a sense of belonging.

Within the culture of care, an unexpected finding of surprise arose from the mentees as they reacted to the caring intentionality demonstrated by their mentors. Mentees were surprised to experience personal and caring responses from their mentors in academic settings that were initially perceived to be more formal and separate from their personal lives. Mentees expressed how appreciative they were that their mentors included their families, were responsive to their professional challenges, and were flexible when they were grieving the loss of a loved one. Feeling that their mentors truly cared for their well-being and existence beyond academia, motivated mentees to persevere throughout the dissertation process. This finding of surprise seemed to reinforce the prevalence of student predispositions and preconceived notions of high formalization and low responsiveness that they may bring to the mentor-mentee relationship in the dissertation process.

Contrastingly, mentors described care as more of a natural–and expected–human response. This finding is significant because it illuminates an underlying assumption from students that mentors, professors, and/or advisors exist in an institutional vacuum. Scholars have given a great deal of attention to the importance of humanizing students and recognizing how they exist in multitude of ways beyond a doctoral program (Al Makhamreh & Stockley, 2020), but this finding supports the need to give added emphasis to framing the mentor as a whole person with many identities. Communicating the humanistic nature of the mentor may improve M&A Skill 2, the mutual respect (Cruz et al., 2020; Singe et al., 2021).

Framing Learning as Process

Both the second and third themes of Meaningful Feedback and Learning a New Writing Genre positioned learning within a growth mindset, which was highly valued as a critical component of navigating the DiP. These findings reflect M&A Skill 6 on creating a supportive and safe learning environment where scaffolding and direction support a developmental and growth-oriented approach to the doctorate. This study supports the previous work of Eyres and colleagues (2001) who stated,

> When doctoral students ask for help "learning the language," when they wonder if their "language was really communicating" they aren't asking their faculty to be writing teachers so much as they are asking them to be their guides. They aren't asking for editing; they are asking for socialization into the scholarly community (p. 155).

Indeed, rather than assuming their mentees already knew how to write in this genre, successful mentors in this study met students at their level and provided scaffolded and thought-provoking feedback to help them progress.

For the participants, the level of detailed feedback, challenge, and writing support reflected the serious conviction and high expectations their mentors held for them to grow as scholarly practitioners. In alignment with M&A Skill 8, both the mentees and mentors attributed much of their success to the "rigorous practices that set high expectations…and offer challenges…aimed at improvement" (CPED, 2024, para. 12). Reflecting on their dissertation experience, mentees cherished their mentor's commitment to excellence and how they pushed them to experience it for themselves.

Mentors recognized that detailed feedback could be overwhelming to students and moreover counterproductive, so they carefully considered how to best deliver feedback in ways that would drive the dissertation process forward. While Al Makhamreh and Stockley (2017) highlighted how unbalanced negative feedback was deleterious to students' well-being, the findings from this study, however, showed that students were less inclined to internalize strong feedback negatively when they understood the purpose of the feedback and the constructive nature of it. Mentors reframed their feedback in a positive light and "as a gift." In doing so, mentors

cultivated a growth mindset in their mentees that kept them motivated and inspired to improve their work.

Additionally, feedback was deemed more impactful by all participants when it challenged them to dig in deeper. This finding reflects CPED M&A Skill 5 on creating intellectual space where students are guided to expand their scholarly thinking. Capello (2020) referred to this as a coaching questioning strategy to help doctoral students reimagine their thinking. This linkage is critical as feedback is intimately intertwined with academic identity (Eyres et al., 2001). Inouye and McAlpine (2019) explained that when feedback promoted critical self-reflection it stimulated "academic identity development as demonstrated through increased confidence, growing knowledge about the field and disciplinary writing requirements on how to position oneself in writing through authorial voice and learning to view oneself as part of the disciplinary conversation" (p. 16). Students articulated an appreciation for writing feedback that also acted as inclusion to and structured practice within the academic community.

Genre-Based Modeling

In addition to providing strong feedback, mentors also gave significant focus to introducing and working through the dissertation genre of academic writing. Genre-based approaches to writing help learners become fluent in the discourse of the genre (Aunurrahman et al., 2016). Helping students learn the research report structure in conjunction with the style of scholarly writing enabled students to adapt to a new genre.

The developmental mindset was further demonstrated in how mentors would model the writing process rather than just explain it. This type of mentor-modeling approach diverges from related literature that discusses modeling writing. In those discussions, the modeling comes from the use of pre-written mentor texts where students learn from exemplars (Aunurrahman et al., 2016; Markos & Buss, 2022). The mentors in this study who engaged in a modeling process would instead rewrite a small section of the student's written text to demonstrate the nuances of the academic genre. Rather than trying to mimic a mentor text, this showing-over-telling approach was more responsive to students. By co-constructing the writing process, students could better see the gaps in their own writing.

IMPLICATIONS

The implications stemming from this research emphasize three key areas for mentorship growth: creating a culture of care, framing learning as a process, and engaging in genre-based training. We also want to stress that while this study was specific to the EdD dissertation process, these findings provide relevant implications for mentorship at all educational levels, departments, and programs. These implications may offer useful and practical insights for all faculty, advisors, and administrators.

Based on this study, creating an atmosphere of support and engaged presence with doctoral students is imperative to their success. Faculty chairs should intentionally humanize the dissertation process by establishing connections with their students that explicitly acknowledge their outside lives and lived experiences. Doing so will help students persevere during this final push to finish their doctorate. Additionally, mentors should couple care, warmth, and affirmation with high expectations to keep their students motivated and improve their sense of belonging.

Doctoral programs must reframe learning as a process where feedback is positioned as a "gift" that fosters a positive feedback mindset. We recommend that faculty also cultivate a space that engages students on the iterative nature of scholarship where students are pushed to dig deeper, follow tangents, and interrogate their thinking. Faculty should challenge students to rise to the expectations of scholarly inquiry by delivering challenging and meaningful feedback that prompts metacognition and critical thinking. Additionally, EdD programs should be sensitive to the ways in which feedback is delivered in the dissertation process to ensure it promotes a growth mindset in students and positions them within the academic community.

Rather than assuming EdD students are proficient writers in this genre and that faculty mentors fully understand how to foster scholarly writing, doctoral programs should strategically integrate professional learning opportunities to develop genre fluency in preparation for the dissertation. Using a "showing-over-telling" approach where faculty model the writing process demystifies scholarly writing and clarifies the genre. These implications for practice build on the M&A skills outlined by CPED and can encourage faculty to reflect on their own mentoring practices surrounding a culture of care, framing learning as a process, and modeling writing as a genre.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Within this study, there were several limitations that should be considered as the impetus for future research. While this study was limited to mentors and mentees that won the CPED DiP award, it provides insight into the common structures that supported such high-quality work. Additional qualitative research replicating this study with a larger variety of mentors and mentees would help determine if the findings were unique to award winners or shared with non-award winners. This study had more participation from mentees than mentors; therefore, research that provides more voice to mentors would help further illuminate this line of inquiry. Additionally, some of the CPED DiPs were organized as group dissertations, but we did not distinguish between individual and group projects within this study to maintain anonymity. However, future research should explore the differences between the mentoring experience of group dissertations compared to individual dissertations. Finally, our methodological approach was limited in that it relied solely on in-depth individual interviews. Additional qualitative methods of data collection such as questionnaires or mentoring logs could further triangulate the phenomenon of doctoral mentorship to a greater extent.

Future research is also needed to investigate student perceptions quantitatively and across demographics. The development of a valid and reliable quantitative survey instrument aligned to the nine M&A Skills would provide researchers with interesting possibilities to test this conceptual framework numerically beyond the assessment tool. This would afford educational researchers the opportunity to make statistical comparisons across groups and member institutions.

CONCLUSION

With the recent release of the CPED M&A assessment tool, this article is timely and should prompt robust discussion. Additionally,

faculty would benefit by considering ways to find balance between meeting the psychosocial needs of mentees and maintaining high expectations for the quality of work. The mentees valued their mentor's commitment to scholarship and recognized this was what pushed them to complete an award-winning dissertation. Lastly, faculty would also benefit by considering the ways in which they are providing writing support and feedback to doctoral students.

We hope that these insights can help provide depth and nuance to the elements of the M&A framework. In the spirit of CPED's hallmark learning exchanges, we decided against providing prescriptive solutions and, instead, decided to conclude with some guiding questions to help spark discussion related to the M&A framework:

- Is a Culture of Care a distinct element of M&A or embedded within multiple elements of the existing framework?
- Given the importance of academic writing and feedback, how might that element interact with M&A framework?

Finally, as prompted by CPED, EdD programs would benefit by assessing their mentoring practices for students and how they are strategically preparing faculty to chair dissertations in light of the M&A Skills and the findings from this study.

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