

## Breaking the Silence:

### Healing Through Writing- The Liminal Experiences of an EdD Student

**Dibett Lopez**   
Georgia State University  
dlopez31@student.gsu.edu

#### ABSTRACT

Due to the competitive and inequitable structure of doctoral programs, there has been a rapid rise of mental and physical issues faced by students. In this article, I use autoethnography as a method to explore my experiences and their implications on my learning and wellbeing as an Afro-Latinx EdD student at a public university. Using "captured moments", a photography analogy for the experiences lived, I explore the depth and light each "captured moment" has created and/or has resulted in the ways in which I looked at the content and people I was exposed to within my program and as well as the ways in which my health was impacted. These experiences were then analyzed through liminality theory and Strong Black Woman (SBW) schema to support the impact of these experiences. The call to action provides direction for how educators and researchers can provide students with more supportive and equitable experiences that would provide for an increase of students seeking to obtain their EdD.

#### KEYWORDS

*liminality theory, strong black women schema, doctoral students*

"You won't have a life these next three years, so be prepared to make those sacrifices," the stern pale face behind the screen stated.

"Try to think about what you can do instead of what you can't. Just work around it" her annoyed voice echoed.

"Have you ever thought about actually grieving the process instead of harboring anger?" they ask piercingly.

"Take care of yourself; you are most important in this process," her worried voice cautioned.

Each of these statements has taken a permanent residence inside of my brain; Swirling throughout it with the little voice that reminds me of how tired I am, of how "they're watching", and of how I am "just so close." These remarks from colleagues, professors, healthcare professionals, and family are ingrained memories of this journey of academic livelihood. Ironically, this raging war between "climbing the ivory tower" and caring for oneself is not unique to me. It is a battle many have endured and researched (Evans, 2007; Lovitts, 2001; Smith & Douthit, 2020). However, over time, this battle has become much more than just a climb. In fact, calling it an ivory tower today is a false depiction for some. With the inception of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is no longer an ivory tower at all. Instead, it has become a solitary confinement cell whose storm proof door comes embedded with a sliding metal window strictly to benefit those who keep guard. It is a place engulfed in darkness that only provides its prisoner with one hour of daylight, just enough to remind us that we are still alive before drowning us back into solitude for the 23 hours that follow.

With limited access to people who understand this world, this incarcerated-like life is one that some doctoral students may have been experiencing since the pandemic began and some even before

it. These doctoral students, like many in the world, have faced an increase in isolation, limited support and resources, which may have the power to change some of their educational trajectories. While the isolating nature of doctoral work has been explored (Janta et al., 2014; Kohun & Ali, 2005; Lovitts, 2001; Van Wingerden, 2024), the pandemic and its aftermath has provided a more in-depth perspective of the increased challenges that students have experienced in multiple academic spaces (Sverdlik et al., 2023). The pandemic has placed some doctoral students into a unique liminal space, slightly different than those previously described as it has contributed to a rise in imposter syndrome, physical and mental health issues, and drop-out rates (Andal & Wu, 2021; Andrade et al., 2023; Colpitts et al., 2020; Donohue et al., 2021; Sideropoulos et al., 2022; Sverdlik et al., 2023). Liminal spaces are described as transitional spaces where people may experience timelessness and ambiguity with their current identities and who they aim to become (Beech, 2011; Turner, 1967). With the rise of these challenges in academic spaces being further perpetuated by the ever-present guards, it is important to re-visit the experiences of EdD students in the last four years.

This autoethnography seeks to illuminate the author's experiences as an Afro-Latina within an EdD program at a public Southern university. It uses captured moments, snapshots from voice memos, and journal entries, that include phases from the inception of the program until present. This autoethnography analyzes the experiences faced by the author that may also be faced by other doctoral students, especially women of color, in EdD programs. It also examines the effects of those experiences on their learning and wellness during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a call to action for those who have experienced some of the captured moments and for those who have not. I hope that by raising



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awareness of these liminal experiences, individuals can be more conscious of their interactions and can avoid perpetuating injustices.

It is important to consider that EdD programs focus on the practical application of research within educational realms unlike PhD programs which focus on research, theory, and knowledge creation (Shulman et al., 2006). Each program is shaped by the faculty and institution they live in which can lead to a variety of different experiences for students. Most literature regarding the experiences of doctoral students focuses on those in PhD programs (Shulman et al., 2006). One of the key differences between the two degrees besides their focus is that EdD students have fewer graduation requirements depending on their programs (i.e. teaching a course, grant seeking, shorter programs of study, etc.). These differences in graduation requirements have the potential to make or break students as it requires much more than just time commitments. Studies show that doctoral students have to find a strong balance between personal, professional, and graduate life in order to persist in obtaining a higher degree as shown in multiple studies (Burgess et al., 2011; Robinson, 2018; Vera, 2012; Willess, 2023). These differences can also create tension between the needs of EdD students and those of PhD students, as these demands can require different amounts of faculty support. Some studies have even shown that EdD students feel as if their work is undervalued or unimportant (Baker et al., 2021; Dorian, 2021; Sims & Barnett, 2015). While there is little research on the differences between students experiencing this tension, these studies show that there is a need for more research about the experiences of EdD students and their trajectories within and after their programs. This article explores the perspective of an EdD student and showcases how some of these tensions and experiences have shaped the learning and well-being of the student.

## Historical Context

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about many new ways to think about the ins and outs of education (Apple et al., 2022; Green, 2023; Sarker et al., 2022). The pandemic forced those in education to change their modes of learning and to think creatively about new ways to engage, educate, and assess students and themselves due to isolation. However, it also brought limitations such as social and political boundaries, time management, limited resources and finances, and an increase in mental and physical health impairments (Corbera et al., 2020; Nerlino, 2022; Sarah et al., 2021). EdD students are often full-time teachers or teacher leaders in a K-12 school, as various programs allow students to earn a degree while teaching simultaneously. This detail is significant in the trajectory of doctoral students, as many are juggling both the demands of the program and the demands of their careers. These doctoral students are working in a profession that is currently undergoing a major crisis, with shortages of support, resources, and accessibility. Even prior to the pandemic, educators have been facing neoliberal challenges that are hindering their desires to continue in the field (Dunn, 2018). While neoliberal mandates are not new, the pandemic has now exacerbated the challenges previously faced by educators by pushing for more privatization of education through charter schools, dealing with low pay with extremely high inflation rates, subjective evaluations, and strict policies that limit curricular movement (Apple et al., 2022; Giroux, 2020). These ever-growing demands are moving teachers, especially teachers of color, to leave the field (Marx et al., 2023). With this never-ending shortage, current teachers are given more responsibilities and are expected to fill

educational debts resulting from both the pandemic and prior years. Some educators may experience discriminatory practices because of their race, ethnicity and gender, age, sexual orientation, religion, and class, including microaggressions at work, extra responsibilities, and overt racism (Baker et al., 2021; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021; Frank et al., 2021). These infringements impact all but especially marginalized EdD students as they are experiencing ostracism in multiple spheres of their lives (work, school/universities, etc.) (Marshall, 2024; Wright & Aniefuna, 2024). For some EdD educators, living a double and sometimes triple life is the only way to survive in their respective workplaces and universities. The experiences of marginalization impact their mental and physical well-being according to Njoku and Marshall (2024).

Recent research addresses how the pandemic forced multiple changes in the way these graduate programs are run and their impact on students. Marotta (2024) showed that beginning the EdD program during the pandemic provided scholars with opportunities for critical reflection of the self and of experiences, informative and reflexive dialogue, awareness of context, and authentic relationships, which lead to a transformative learning experience. Perhaps because students entered this experience during a time when circumstances were abnormal, their transformative experiences were more profound because of the context. The changes brought on by COVID-19 (i.e.- zoom meetings, accessibility, forced socialization, social boundaries) could have influenced how students engage in their programs normally. Critical reflections by faculty shown in Shaw et al. (2024) provide insight on how faculty used this moment to think about ways to change their programs to center students and their needs during the pandemic. Shaw et al. (2024) provided the faculty perspective of the changes that they made, but there is no insight into how students fared with these changes. Similarly, Hawkins and Martens (2024) show how students used their specific teaching content to assess how they navigated turbulence in their work while using Improvement Science methods during the pandemic. While the professors highlighted the positive reflections students had about the learning, the study itself does not reflect student individual experiences and how they navigated the balances of those turbulent moments and their multiple roles (student, teacher, parent, etc.). These articles highlight positive outcomes because of pandemic changes but fall short of examining how those changes impacted student experiences post-COVID 19 and in the multiple roles that they must meet. Consequently, the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are still being studied, as these short-term impacts could have lasting consequences.

## Conceptual Framework

Students, professors, and support staff - all parties - construct the meaning of the world and materials around them. This meaning influences how people interact, the power structures that form because of their interactions, and the accessibility to different resources that each member of the community has (Egbert & Sanden, 2020). Critical socio-constructionism provides scholars with an ability to critique issues of the constructed knowledge of society (Crotty, 2003). It offers a way to understand and dismantle existing systems of oppression and to build a more equitable society as we continue to learn and evolve. This autoethnography uses this epistemological view and the frameworks of Strong Black Women (SBW) schema (Parks & Hayman, 2024) and liminality theory (Turner, 1970) to critique how social interactions influence the lives and learning of EdD students. The components of each of the

frameworks, which can overlap, provide insight into the effects of the challenges that I have faced and how it has impacted my scholarly work, my perceptions of secondary institutions, and my interactions with those in the institution.

Strong Black Women (SBW) schema is rooted in the historical stereotypes of Black women and their strength to persevere through social, economic, and cultural oppressions, beginning during slavery (Abrams et al., 2014). Identified by the factors of being independent, hardworking, hard achieving, emotionally contained, taking care of others, and overcoming adversity with grace, SBW schema characterizes itself as the ability to personify multiple forms of strength at all times (Abrams et al., 2019; Nelson et al., 2016). It can be seen as a coping mechanism that women of color personify in times of adversity to mask any emotions or insecurities. With the demands of being a full-time teacher and full-time EdD student, women of color may wear this mask of strength in order to handle the stressors from both the workplace and institutions.

Liminality theory is a set of principles that underlie the ideas of being between but never fully within (Beech, 2011). With anthropological roots, liminality theory discusses how individuals and groups are in a transitional state between two states or statuses (Turner, 1967). In this *in between* space, individuals and groups are characterized by rituals or rites of passage and a feeling of uncertainty and ambiguity (Turner, 1967). Turner (1970) argued that liminality is a phase in which individuals and groups reflect their society in ways that ignite a change to their sense of self and status in society. Hetland et al. (2001) conclude that because of this reflection, liminality disrupts one's original identity, leading to the construction of a new identity that encompasses new powers and roles. Because all doctoral students must endure a series of rituals and rites of passage such as required doctoral classes, comprehensive exams, and multiple defenses (comprehensive, prospectus, and dissertation), they are constantly in liminal spaces that can often make them feel isolated and confused about their roles in the multiple societies that they engage. For marginalized populations, liminality theory has been seen in the historically transitional phases where their socioeconomic statuses have been influenced by multiple factors. These moments in history (i.e. slavery, women's suffrage, apartheid, COVID-19 pandemic, etc.) have placed individuals into a space that has left them questioning who they are. Cox (2015) argues that, while these populations have faced an egregious amount of oppression from hegemonic forces, it does not mean that they are forever oppressed. Cox (2015) proclaims that these liminal spaces have made historically marginalized populations into shapeshifters where individuals can transform into new roles as they enter different spaces. Similarly, EdD students, especially those of color, have had to shapeshift in order to adjust to the academic circles that they encounter. This continual shapeshifting can also be seen as a mask that provides these students with an internal shelter from the inequitable conditions in certain academic spheres.

## Methodology

Autoethnography is a unique methodology that combines the areas of society, self, and research. Ellis and Bochner (2006) first identified autoethnography as a blend of autobiographical writing and ethnographic inquiry that allows researchers to examine personal experiences within cultural contexts. Since then, autoethnography has had multiple variations and has been applied to different disciplines. In educational research, those who have applied

autoethnography discuss being driven to it because of its usefulness to apply a critical lens when examining and reflecting on their own educational experiences in different roles (Ellis & Adams, 2020; Ellis et al., 2011; Hughes, 2020). Maseti (2018) posits that "it is an empowering and healing discourse that allows the emancipated to represent their own story as they have experienced it, using their own voice" (p. 345). Lourens (2018) states an autoethnography is useful in uncovering deeply concealed oppressions. This autoethnography allows me to examine and describe my experiences and life critically as a student in an EdD program using journal entries, voice notes, photographs, class notes, and personal conversations as ethnographic data.

Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) argue that writing is a method of inquiry. It provides the researcher with the ability to learn about themselves and their topic and a partial, local, and historical knowledge that brings insight to a research topic. In reflecting about my experiences as an EdD student, I sought personal data materials inquiry about my experiences and their significance. Using transcribed voice memo notes and journal entries from the beginning two years of my program (2021-2023), I identified key moments that highlighted some of the most difficult challenges that I faced. Using these data sources (five voice notes and six journal entries), I used both open coding and thematic coding to discuss the significance of the challenges and their impact. Lastly, using a crystallization process (Ellingson, 2009) in which I compared the findings from other studies of EdD students and their experiences to discuss the implications of how programs and the way they are run can influence learning, wellbeing, and trajectory of students.

## Captured Moments

To present the experiences that many EdD students face, one must consider the roles that they are placed in and their impacts. By portraying my personal experiences and citing those of others, we enable readers to capture moments but may never get to express the residual effects of them. By sharing four pivotal moments as an EdD student, I provide insight into the residual effects that these moments had on my personal journey and illuminate that these moments may not have only happened to me.

### Captured Moment #1-"You won't have a life these next three years so be prepared to make sacrifices"; voice note #3- July 1- post first summer semester

This summer semester [summer 2021] was wild. I don't even know how I got here. It was interesting to meet my colleagues via zoom, but I honestly am unsure about many of them. With 10 of us in this cohort, I don't see how some of us, myself included, got in. While we're a unique bunch, I wonder if [NAME OMITTED] was trying to fill a quota. There are 8 people of color and 2 White folks including [Name omitted] all with diverse backgrounds and specialties how did they choose to put us together? While I'm really happy to see eight women of color and [Name Omitted], I still struggled to be fully comfortable. There is something about this space. It doesn't feel like it use to in undergrad or any of my previous programs. Really now that I think about it, it wasn't until [name omitted] reached out to me to ask me if Dr. X had asked me to speak with her privately that I felt seen by someone other than [Name Omitted]. She told me that she was asked to stay attentive during classes. At the time I didn't think anything of it as I was seeking a way to keep myself afloat in those 29 days filled with working with [name omitted]'s summer camp schedule, 200 pages a night of reading, and written reflections. But thinking

about it now, I feel weird. I found her trust in me unusual. I find myself making excuses for Dr. X but I don't want to invalidate [x]'s experiences. Professor X was more aggressive toward the end of the semester. Maybe it was because of her family's current status or because her colleague had changed universities days before she was due to teach us class #2. I don't know but I also can't really focus on that right now. If summer was this intense, how am I going to manage this when work starts again? and when the kids have afterschool sports? I need to find more time and tools to help me because this month went by quickly. A blur really but now I'm tasked with having to find a committee while still trying to grasp what they hell I just learned in 29 days.

One of the most important components of being a student is not only the interactions with professors but the feedback and support that students receive from faculty (Choi et al., 2023; Harris, 2022). EdD students are indirectly pressured to consider what they want to study, which scholars are linked to their areas of interests for study, and who they believe can best support them early in their program. The irony of how much this was spoken about during our initial summer classes is not lost on me. As reflected above, being uncomfortable was common in these first few weeks of class. From having to meet strangers for the first time in an online setting to the many comments or questions that were made that often made me feel like an outsider, being uncomfortable and not belonging became staple feelings in this first semester. Other pressures, for example, having one semester of doctoral classes down or having never stepped foot onto campus and being expected to find a chair and two members who would guide me in this dissertation process also contributed to these feelings of isolation, abandonment, and stress. By randomly emailing professors and staff to build by dissertation committee, I began what would become a three-semester trek. Discouraged after countless unanswered introductory emails and panicky conversations with my advisor, I slowly withdrew. For every step I took toward discontinuing in that Fall semester, I was given a push back through one of my classes or conversations. Whether it was a new theory, methodology, or another false promised filled conversation from professors within the program, I talked myself into continuing. The work and false promises of a better tomorrow kept me in place by temporarily blinding me to compliance.

Because of the complicated processes and social contexts that EdD students must endure in a limited amount of time, feelings of isolation can arise (Choi et al., 2023). These feelings of isolation can also contribute to the demotivation of students, especially women of color, who often stay silent in uncomfortable spaces (Abrams et al., 2019). In moments where EdD students have to adjust to new spaces, silence is often interpreted as misunderstanding of content, unpreparedness, being unprepared, or even, in some extreme cases, as people who do not care (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012; Blockett et al., 2016). This was evident by what my colleagues shared about perceived inattentiveness; my Black and brown colleagues were called upon by professors and asked interrogation style questions about the content in response to their silence. Reflecting on this summer, some were not even given the same type of processing time as others. In reviewing the realities, it is difficult for people of color in these predominantly White led spaces to simply state what they are thinking without feeling like an imposter and/or being seen as overly aggressive. For women of color, triple consciousness can lead women to battling inner thoughts of trying to say what they want to say, seeing themselves through the eyes of our colleagues, and choosing the right ways to present themselves based on their environment and context. Unfortunately, this is a constant internal

battle we face that is frankly exhausting and disgraceful, especially in spaces where we are supposed to be feeling the safest and understood as much as possible.

### **Captured Moment #2 Family vs. Institution- Voice note September 23rd, 2021**

A 4 pm tumbling class on Tuesday, a 5 O'clock baseball drop off- no WIFI at the park, a conversation about longer summers away with her dad, a reading theory class at 4:30 on Wednesdays which meant leaving work right at the last bell to drive 45 minutes downtown to campus. Coming home at 7:30 to recap your child's day while thinking about the paper that's due at 11:59 pm the following day. You've outlined and have all the resources but you teach and have to be up by 4:45 am to ensure tomorrow's class materials are prepped and ready. Exhausted is not even the word. It just never ends.

Moving from the Fall 2021 semester into the spring semester of 2022, I kept my head afloat. Working until countless hours of the night and into the next day, using speechify to listen to articles and book chapters, cheering my nephew's first grand slam, and teaching my daughter the ways to navigate chapter books at bedtime was my daily routine, all the while teaching 117 high school students in hybrid mode. Learning to live for the academy had become my daily routine. While I loved learning and enjoyed the lively discussions in all the academic spaces, I slowly began to feel the exhaustion pouring out of my body. Most importantly, I noticed the slow rise of the guilt that ate me up every time I was behind a computer screen at home. While I tried as much as I could to be present, the more I successfully gave one aspect of my life full attention, another suffered. While the warning came in 2021, I foolishly thought that I could handle it all if I had the right support. I pre-planned doing schoolwork together, planned to only do work at work, and made sure everything went onto the calendar. Despite all my efforts, I was never fully immersed in one thing. It was a series of merging worlds at every point. Even after finding my committee chair and one member in the same semester, I still missed games and practices. Remembering that I always had to put the academy first. Despite compensating with thoughts such as "I'm doing this for her well-being" and "It's only three years" or "I'm doing it while she's young", the guilt fortified. This guilt of having to rely on my family members to feed this academic dream still resides in me. Doctoral students who are parents face endless forms of guilt (Corbera et al., 2020). The pandemic threw this guilt into a completely new realm, as many parents, especially mothers, were required to teach and support their own children, the children of others, and themselves in new spaces unfamiliar to them (Wright & Aniefuna, 2024). Because of the multiple roles that doctoral students play, never being able to give one thing their full attention leads to feelings of inadequacy. As a single mother with a supportive community, I constantly lived in these cycles of guilt that I was forced to mask in various spaces. I could never take a break or complain. I had signed up to live for the academy. Burn-out was making its way to me like a silent robber in the dark.

### **Captured Moment # 3- Work vs. Classwork-"Try to think about what you can do instead of what's holding you back; Just work around it"- Voice memo post-Spring 2022**

I'm panicking. again. I'm panicking. I literally have 4 months to find a third committee member and 6 months before comps.



No committee= No comps. The longer I'm here, the more I pay. The more my family pays. Summer is fast approaching. These professors I've emailed have yet again not responded. [Name Omitted]'s word's "They work for you" make me laugh out loud. They work for me but despite my tuition being paid (thanks to Daddy Biden), they don't even answer their emails. Not even as a way to politely decline me.

Entering my second year of this EdD program, I was at an ultimate low. With comprehensive exams, a rite of passage, quickly approaching, I lived in a constant state of panic. Despite my advisor telling me to "work around it", there was no way I could. How could I defend comps without a full committee? Often, with EdD students working in multiple roles and having a smaller program of study, they can be placed in boxes that dismiss their concerns. They can be smoothed over with comments like the one above or ultimately ignored. While this is also seen in some PhD programs (Choi et al., 2023; Wallaert, 2022), these issues are problematic in EdD programs, as students are expected to finish their programs at a much faster pace than others. This faster pace of the program and its requirements create additional stressors on students who enter these programs hoping to be thoroughly supported.

Sitting in the first day of summer classes, I remember jostling with the idea of quitting the program with stronger feelings than before, all the while secretly fearing for this new professor for my second summer course. Paradoxically, it would be this professor who would end up becoming my saving grace. In this summer class, I finally felt both seen and heard. The irony that she was not part of this program's faculty, but still a well-known professor in the building was not lost on me. This professor became the final member of my committee, but much more than that over the months that followed. She became my mentor and academic mother who guided me with love and nurture, yet also gave wise criticism that influenced how I moved through the rest of this program. With a secured third member, I entered the fall semester ready to take comprehensive exams and eventually falling back in love with school. Authentic and meaningful mentoring has always been a vital part of a student's success (Blockett et al., 2016; Fournillier & Edwards, 2020). The importance of mentorship in EdD programs is tenfold as students are on a tighter timeline and require more on demand support than some other students.

#### **Captured Moment # 4 -"Have you ever thought about actually grieving the process instead of harboring anger?" -Endless Hives**

Spring of 2022. I finally had my committee set after an endless struggle of unanswered emails and failed attempts at meetings. I had crossed the first threshold successfully. Comps were passed and completed. While the loom of deadlines on an article paper, chapters one through three of my pre-emptive study being re-envisioned, and endless meetings, on March 12, exactly 13 days before my 31st birthday, my body rebelled. My back and arms slowly developed hives which according to doctors had no real "trigger". I had not come into contact with any of my normal allergens, those which had doubled since starting my program, and had been taking my daily doses of loratadine. What began as small hives turned in 30 welts that ranged from my arms to the bottom of my feet. Contact dermatitis is what the doctor said prescribing me 3 rounds of prednisone that skyrocketed my blood sugar levels. When it happened again only 3 months later, the doctor seemed to have a change of diagnosis. "I don't know what this could be if all your allergy testing has come back- Hives could come from anything including stress"-

A laugh slipped from me at that very moment. In those three months, My committee chair had just resigned from her position, my prospectus was nowhere near complete nor was it something that I felt passionate to do any more, my student loans were racking up, my uncle had been diagnosed and died of cancer all within a two month span, and half of the administration at my school was changing come the fall. Stressed was an understatement.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a rise in stressors for all. With a rise in inflation, political divisions that impact all spheres of life, and educational demands, EdD students' stressors are unique in that they are never ending. They are like an impending cloud with chances of dropping rain at any moment. The physical and mental ails of doctoral students, especially those of women of color, have been a long-documented area (Evans, 2007; Hopwood & Paulson, 2012; Parks & Hayman, 2024). In recent years, there have been multiple authors who have shown light on the influence of the pandemic on the self-care of Black and brown doctors (Geary et al., 2023; Njoku & Marshall, 2024). These studies have shown that because of the stresses from the academy, the wellbeing of this population has resulted in an increase of anxiety, physical ailments, and even death (Parks & Hayman, 2024). While these studies highlighted women who have already completed doctoral programs, it provides insight into how the academy can influence doctoral students. If the professors are suffering, the students cannot be too far behind as they chase their own dreams.

With the increase in the number of graduate students, especially Black and brown women, suffering from both physical and mental ails from the stress and endless pressures that stem from interactions and experiences similar to those described above, why has there not been any call to action? Why have measures not been taken to better support these graduate students have a proper work, life, and school balance that allows them to progress without the price tag of wearing out their bodies or burning out their minds?

## **Discussion & Implications**

These four critical events in my course of study are not unique to me. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers and doctoral students have had a rise in stress levels, obligations, and debt (Sarah et al., 2021). These events pushed my boundaries and tested my strength and while I am stronger and more aware, at what cost? I am still wondering whether I am here or there, despite successfully completing some rites of passage and despite pushing forward when the world felt as if it were crumbling. I always wore a mask that showed the world a brave face. After reflecting on conversations with friends and colleagues and reviewing the outcomes of numerous experiences over the past three years, it's clear that these experiences are all too common among EdD students as reflected in much SBW literature (Abrams et al., 2019; Nelson et al., 2016). Their lives are significantly influenced by the programs they participate in, the professors they interact with, and the schools where they work. Ruminating on my progression through these captured moments, I am no longer the same scholar I started this program as. I am more skeptical of the academy, I am more hesitant to try new things, and I have plateaued in this program. What happens when the learning stops? While it's easy to tell a doctoral student that they should just do it, it's difficult when there is lack of support, severe isolation, and few resources that may be tailored to their needs.

While the precise details of the circumstances could only be fully understood if a movie or TV show showed the outside world,

these captured moments and their accompanying statements provide an understanding of the need to improve the experiences of EdD students. A student's decision to enter academic spaces may come with a cost to themselves, their families, their jobs, and/or all of other multiplicities of which they are part of. For some the cost far outweighs the benefits and yet some, like myself, continue to seek these spaces not only for the financial benefit but also for the emotional, social, and physical benefits that allow for the mentality of "I am here so others can sit at the table too".

The academic world is a kaleidoscope dream for those of us who live in this solitary confinement. We are intrigued by the beauty that it has as we gaze upon its intricate patterns that dare us to dream and create. Its euphoric state plays coy with our emotions tricking us into us to continuing to dream so that we can, at some point, enjoy it. Yet its complexity keeps us from fully understanding its functionality and purpose in our world. When we identify one pattern, it quickly changes direction, leaving us in a state of both confusion and isolation. Despite this iterative cycle of trial and error, we refuse to give up. We are tied to the belief that education is elevation and that without it we perpetuate cycles of injustice, complacency, and instability. So how do we achieve both elevation and well-being? How can one be just as equal to the other so that both are valued in the progression of all students, especially historically marginalized EdD students?

We must begin with ourselves. One of the most important ways in which EdD programs can better support their students is through their communications and interactions. Both students and professors must ask themselves: Am I practicing what I am preaching? What is the greatest good I can do? By providing reflective thoughts and opportunities, practitioners, both professors and students, can mediate through difficult situations that are stressful. Communication between students and professors is key in their development (Ali et al., 2016; Overall et al., 2011; Terry & Ghosh, 2015). This communication must not only be critical, but it must be honest and truthful. By having truthful, non-dismissive conversations, students can accurately see their trajectories in programs and can plan effectively in how they proceed in their programs. Students, much like professors, need opportunities to communicate their progress and expectations in the same manner in which some program directors share their expectations. This can happen in a variety of ways including but not limited to designated appointment times on a bi-weekly to monthly basis for students and their chairs to meet, mentoring programs between EdD students who have graduated or are working in post-doctorate roles, or even designated office hours strictly for graduate students with ample time (not just a 15-minute window). Ultimately, many doctoral students are paying for an education that is not paying them in ways that allow them to grow in the profession. Students need to also be given opportunities to share their feedback in more than just surveys and councils with no results or community share-outs about what they are facing. Students need to be able to speak out without fear of retaliation or being overlooked. End of course evaluations are simply not enough. Students should see the results and outcomes of their voices being heard. How can they see change if there is no transparency? By providing the right contexts for constructive conversations, university programs can build strong educational societies that are filled with strong mentorships and true progression for all, not just those bringing the university money.

Self-care is not a privilege- it is a right. Doctoral students should not have to choose between taking care of themselves or doing a

paper. Too often, students are neglecting their health in order to make sure they get all the things they need in. This neglect leads to burn-out, more physical ailments, and, in some severe cases, death (Geary et al., 2023). The academy needs to shape programs in ways that are feasible for practitioners to fully take care of themselves while also earning a degree. This begins with authentic check-ins, building stronger relationships between students and staff, and giving students the opportunities to build realistic schedules in their program of study. If teachers are expected to be flexible in K-12 education after the pandemic, why are professors also not expected to be flexible?

As I move into the next stage, I try to seek a balance between understanding that "the university is not my home" (Maseti, 2018) and that I pay for the university to help me become more than I could I have ever imagined. It is time for us to recognize that while the COVID-19 Pandemic has brought about many good things, it also has had negative effects. By considering this call to action, members of educational fields can create effective changes or restructure their programs to ensure that students are felt, seen, and heard despite the long and arduous process. As we take our next steps in our journeys, let us remember that hooks (2000) has always told us that the essence of love starts with communication.

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