A Three-Chapter DiP:
Focusing on Scholar-Practitioner Preparation

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ABSTRACT

Led by CPED's reconceptualization of the Education Doctorate, EdD programs nationally continue to explore ways to re-envision the Dissertation-in-Practice (DiP) specifically for the development of Scholar-Practitioners. Even as work on innovative dissertation formats has accelerated, many, if not most, DiPs still resemble traditional five-chapter academic dissertations. This article explores an alternative three-chapter DiP format with a balanced focus on (1) an action research study conducted by the candidate, and (2) the candidate's application of findings, alongside social and organizational theory, in their leadership practice. In this way, the three-chapter DiP balances a focus on research and leadership practice, amenable to review, critique, and use by practitioners as well as academics. In this essay, faculty and recent-graduate coauthors describe their first-hand perspectives navigating this model as students and faculty, and add to the emerging landscape of practice regarding EdD dissertations. We outline the rationale, purpose, and assessment guidelines defining this format, and describe key challenges we encountered. Moreover, we discuss the model's flexibility in application, highlighting examples and approaches used by students. The discussion will be useful for EdD programs, faculty, and students who are interested in exploring innovative DiP models that are grounded in both research and practice.

KEYWORDS

dissertation, EdD, scholar-practitioner

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Led by CPED's reconceptualization of the Education Doctorate, EdD programs nationwide continue to explore ways to re-envision the Dissertation-in-Practice (DiP) specifically for the development of scholar-practitioners (Perry, 2016). Even as work on innovative dissertation formats has accelerated (Anderson, et al., 2022) many, if not most, DiPs still resemble traditional five-chapter academic dissertations (Storey et al., 2015; Watson & Nehls, 2016). A small number of guides (Buss & Zumbo, 2014; Storey & Hesbol, 2016; Storey & Maughan, 2014) and studies (Smaldone et al., 2019; Kennedy, et al., 2020) aside, the literature on the EdD has not yet coalesced around alternative DiP models that can fully guide practice within programs.

In this essay, faculty and recent graduates collaborated to describe the alternative three-chapter DiP model implemented in the University of Dayton EdD program. We outline the rationale, purpose, and assessment guidelines defining this format and describe key challenges we have encountered with its implementation. Moreover, we discuss the model's flexibility in application, highlighting examples and approaches used by students. The discussion will be useful for EdD programs, faculty, and students who are interested in exploring alternative DiP models that are grounded in both research and practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on the Dissertation-in-Practice has raised key questions about the nature and structure of capstone experiences in the education doctorate. The following review considers the research and practice-oriented literature on doctoral capstones both generally and in the EdD specifically.

Reforming the Doctoral Dissertation

In the context of the literature on innovative formats for dissertations in general, themes focus on issues related to (1) preparing students for future career roles, (2) making dissertations more conducive to publication, and to a lesser extent, (3) streamlining the format of dissertations for students, reviewers, and shorter time-to-degree. In efforts to make dissertations more relevant

and productive for candidates and more easily published, various iterations of the manuscript dissertation have become more widely accepted in STEM and healthcare disciplines (Anderson et al., 2022; Hakkarainen et al., 2016; Shirazi, 2018; Watson & Nels, 2016). Similarly, arts-based dissertations (novels, performances, videography) have gained some acceptance in social science and humanities fields (Anderson et al., 2022). Nevertheless the five-chapter single-paper format remains the most prevalent and centered model in most contexts (Loss & Ryan, 2016).

Important discussions focused on reforming the dissertation occurred via the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) (with reports in 1991 and 2005 and a convening in 2016) and also via CPED (in 2007 and 2012). Despite a robust discussion dating from the 1990s, only a few empirical studies have emerged to examine the range of recent practice regarding doctoral writing (Anderson et al., 2022; Swank et al., 2021; Thomas, 2016). Historical reviews and practice-oriented sources outline the key issues that students and institutions navigate with alternative dissertation formats (Cahusac de Caux, 2019; Shirazi, 2018). Drawing on previous studies from fields such as nursing (Broome, 2018; Graves, et al., 2018) and education (Thomas, 2016), Swank and colleagues (2021) reviewed benefits and challenges associated with various dissertation models, including the traditional five-chapter format. While these discussions highlight the potential for greater efficiency and relevance to candidates' future careers as benefits of collaborative ("companion" or team-based) dissertations, portfolios, or manuscript dissertations, important challenges also emerged. In particular, the issues described related to (1) a lack of familiarity and acceptance among faculty, leading to disagreements about how to evaluate the quality of alternative-format dissertations, (2) whether programs are structured to prepare candidates and advisors adequately for manuscript dissertations, and (3) a lack of research and evidence on whether and to what degree an alternative model supports the intended preparation and learning objectives envisioned for the doctoral dissertation.

Reenvisioning the DiP

Discussions driven by CPED studies and convenings placed the idea of a distinctive DiP capstone specifically within the context of the reimagined EdD (Storey et al., 2015). Prevalent models for alternative formats named in the literature as specifically appropriate for the DiP include the manuscript dissertation, the companion dissertation, and University of Missouri's six-section scholar-practitioner DiP model (MacGregor & Fellabaum, 2016). Synthesizing CPED's principles and indications on the topic, Perry (2023) has identified the DiP as the application of *inquiry as practice* (a CPED principle) to a problem of practice (PoP), defining the DiP as "a scholarly endeavor that impacts a complex problem of practice" (p. 84).

Perry (2023) builds on Archbald's (2008) priorities concerning (a) whether the DiP process supports students in their development as practitioner-scholars and the deepening of their leadership practice, (b) impact and benefit to the community or organizations served by the DiP, (c) reflect deep intellectual engagement and application, and (d) distinctiveness of form and function. Extending these priorities, Perry points to the need for a DiP to demonstrate candidates' ability to apply research knowledge to practice, a feature which—drawing on Wegin (2011)—she argues entails both proficiency with participatory action research and a useable sense of one's own approach to collaboration and leadership.

Storey and colleagues (2015) likewise drew on Archbald's notion of a "problem-based dissertation" (p. 12). Storey et al. highlighted key benefits of manuscript dissertations for EdD programs, citing that they provide career-relevant and authentic experiences for candidates, who benefit from the further motivation of publishing their work. At the same time, their review identified challenges that programs, advisors, and students encountered in implementing manuscript dissertations in EdD programs. While these challenges included difficulty navigating complex copyright permissions with published or publication-ready chapters, another prevalent theme was the general lack of familiarity that committee reviewers and others had with the model. It is worth noting that these challenges echo questions raised in the general literature on doctoral dissertations and are not specific to the educational principles at the center of CPED and the revitalized EdD (Shirazi, 2018; Storey et al., 2015; Swank, et al., 2016).

In the literature on alternative dissertation formats in general and in sources considering alternative formats specifically relevant to the EdD, discussions have considered the benefits and need for reform alongside challenges that accompany the adoption of innovative approaches. Both the general discussion (e.g., Loss & Ryan, 2023) and sources considering the EdD specifically highlight challenges related to the evaluations and expectations of faculty reviewers and raise questions about whether traditional and alternative formats deliver on the learning experience necessary for fulfilling the purpose of the dissertation. The EdD discussion on the DiP, however, has produced a focused discussion on these points, highlighting challenges relavent to reviewer expectations, but also related to meeting the specific learning goals envisioned for the DiP by CPED and others (Archbald, 2008; Perry, 2023). We drew on these CPED principles and priorities for the DiP and encountered similar motivations and challenges in developing and implementing an alternative to the five-chapter model for our program. In the sections below we describe our three-chapter scholar-practitioner model, outline examples of its implementation, and discuss challenges we have navigated in the process.

THE THREE-CHAPTER SCHOLAR-PRACTITIONER DIP

Purpose, Focus, and Evaluation Processes

The three-chapter scholar-practitioner DiP model balances a focus on research and leadership practice, amenable to review, critique, and use by practitioners as well as academics. Our program employs a three-year cohort structure, which requires that DiPs be completed alongside coursework and typically within about two years. Students follow explicit guidance outlined in a DiP handbook and work closely with a faculty advisor. The DiP handbook provides flexible but detailed outlines and instructions for each of the three chapters, including information about content and formatting. As shown in Figure 1, chapters one and two focus mainly on action research, while the primary emphasis in chapter three is leadership practice. Chapter one, the research proposal, outlines the problem of practice, theoretical framework, literature review, and action research design. Chapter two reports results from the action research study, including a preliminary overview of their implications for the site organization. In chapter three, candidates reflect on their leadership practice and collaborations with organization stakeholders as they transposed their study's results into a viable action plan for their

organization. Given the streamlined format and the need for DiPs to be useful to audiences within the site organization, the length of the three-chapter DiP is shorter than a conventional five-chapter dissertation, typically ca. 90-110 pages. The initial impetus for structuring the DiP this way was to align the capstone project with CPED principles and provide the candidate an experience that emphasizes action research and leadership practice in equal parts. Consequently, our process distinguishes the EdD and differs from typical PhD programs, in that it (1) centers CPED principles and (2) attends to both action research and leadership practice.

Figure 1. The 3-Chapter Scholar-Practitioner Dissertation in Practice
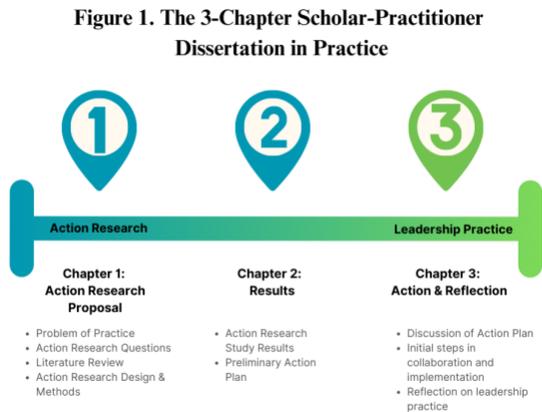
Evaluations include not only assessments of action research methods, analysis, and results, but also center on how the action plan connects to leadership theory/practice, and on the collaborative nature of action research. Many stakeholders are involved in the DiP throughout the process, either by helping to identify the problem of practice, acting as study participants via surveys, interviews, or other data collection methods, or approving and observing the process as it unfolds. Ideally, the action plan—a detailed and multi-step plan with short- and long-term goals for organizational change to address issues revealed in the research—is developed in collaboration with participants and stakeholders within the organization who will be impacted by the change. Our program understands the DiP as one iteration in an ongoing action research cycle, consistent with CPED's conceptualization of inquiry as practice (CPED, 2024). Figure 2 illustrates the three-chapter DiP within the context of the broader action research cycle.

In our program, most DiPs study a problem of practice and develop an action plan based on study findings. In a few cases, students may undertake a DiP in the context of an action research cycle that is already underway in their organization. For example, when a program has already been implemented to address a problem of practice, a student may undertake a DiP, designed as an evaluation study of the intervention. In either scenario, chapter 1 outlines the action research proposal, including a discussion of the PoP, a literature review, and an overview of study design and methods. Chapter 2 focuses on reporting the results of the action research study, culminating in a summary of implications for practice and an initial articulation of the action plan. In chapter 3, the student reflects on their leadership practice in the process of acting on the action plan. The process at the center of this reflection entails further development of the action plan in collaboration, and when possible, partial implementation of the plan. Built into the process is the assumption that our graduates will continue integrating inquiry as

practice into their leadership and organization. Subsequent iterations of the action research cycle would follow even after the DiP is completed.

Figure 2. The Action Research Cycle & The 3-Chapter DiP
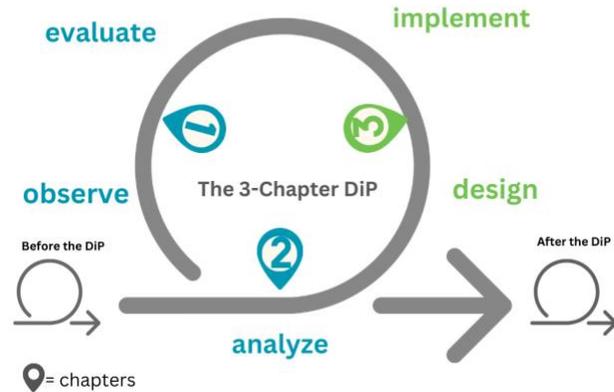
The scholar-practitioner focus of the DiP is supported by groundwork and learning experiences developed throughout the program curriculum. Almost all of the courses in our EdD program include projects students can use to make progress on their DiPs–a mini-study in the term-one and term-three research methods courses, for example: an equity audit and organizational change plan in an organizational change course or a prospective (hypothetical) action plan in the term-7 applied action research course, etc. Starting in Summer 2024, we added a requirement that students attend three writing workshops, with optional one-on-one tutoring sessions and submission of their chapters for review and feedback from credentialed writing specialists.

DiP Committees consist of three members, including the student's chair, a second member recruited from University of Dayton (UD) faculty, and a third external member, who ideally would have practical expertise either in the type of organization or the PoP. Reviews and defenses are conducted asynchronously. In term six of the nine-term program, the DiP committee chair shares the student's proposal (chapter one) and video presentation with the committee and suggests a two week period during which committee members either offer comments/online in a Google Doc, or provide notes and feedback on an accompanying rubric, which focuses on the following areas for evaluation: problem statement, literature review, research design and methods (including ethics/politics, data collection, data analysis), oral presentation, and writing. The committee members then select one of the following options: accepting the DiP proposal with no revisions, minor revisions, or major revisions. Rejecting the DiP proposal is also an option, although chairs work assiduously— before forwarding the candidate to the defense—to ensure that proposals and completed DiPs are of a sufficient quality to receive a passing review. Subsequently, the chair relays the committee's feedback to the student, who then works to complete any required revisions. When revisions are complete, the chair notifies the committee members and asks them to sign off on the completed proposal. DiP committees meet as a group only when it is difficult to come to agreement asynchronously. A similar process is repeated in term nine for the final DiP defense, this time expanding the focus to include all three chapters and evaluation of the candidate's discussion of results, action plan, and leadership practices. At the

end of the ninth term, graduating students present their research at an academic conference held in-person on UD's campus and attended by faculty, staff, their colleagues in the graduating cohort, and all students enrolled in term three. The conference culminates in a banquet and hooding ceremony, gathering graduating students, family members, faculty, and staff to celebrate the graduates' accomplishments together. This celebration is a meaningful highlight for all and a joyous expression of the community we aspire to build through our program.

Chapter Overviews

The first chapter in the three-chapter DiP covers the same ground, in condensed form, as the first three chapters in a five-chapter dissertation. Taking the form of a research proposal based in action research methodology and focused on a problem of practice that is specific to the candidate's organization, the model's first chapter centers the CPED principles of *inquiry as practice* and the *problem-based DiP* (Archbald, 2008; Perry, 2023). Because students in UD's program typically conduct research on the organizations in which they work (*laboratories of practice*, in CPED terms), their problems of practice and research questions tend to be focused and context-specific. This amounts to *inquiry as practice*, which "requires the ability to gather, organize, judge, aggregate and analyze situations, literature, and data with a critical lens" (CPED, 2024). For example, a student who was interested in the adultification of Black girls, particularly in a middle school she was associated with, crafted research questions related to a program for Black girls in her school (Karikari, 2023): (1) How does the after-school program RoyalSapphires build on the Community Cultural Wealth tenets members already possess (Yosso, 2005)? (2) In what ways do members of RoyalSapphires benefit from participating in this afterschool program, from the perspective of Regal Academy administrators and program coordinators? (3) What do Black girls in RoyalSapphires need their teachers and school administrators to know to better support and develop their leadership skills within and beyond the RoyalSapphires program? These research questions reflect the scholar-practitioner focus of the EdD program in that they are designed to help the student engage in inquiry as practice and develop findings, reported in chapter two, that will directly inform the action plan for organizational change that is discussed in chapter three.

The literature review section of chapter one is less extensive than the literature review chapter in a five-chapter dissertation. DiP literature reviews in our program focus on recent and influential research specific to the student's problem of practice, as opposed to reviewing all related research in the field. The proposal chapter concludes with an overview of research design and methods for an action research study of the problem of practice as it plays out within the site organization. The research design and methods are developed for the specific problem of practice, focusing on, for example, specific organizational procedures or policies, and are consistent with equitable, ethical practices focused on social justice. Research designs vary in the methods employed and may analyze qualitative or quantitative data, or both. Typically, the scope is meant to be focused, specific to the site organization, and feasible to be completed in two to four months. More importantly, as an action research study, the research methods should be collaborative enough to support a viable basis for action and change within the organization.

Chapter two reports the results of the action research study and ideally outlines the action plan, based on those results. In doing so, candidates demonstrate their newly acquired knowledge through the construction of a logic model that helps illustrate the sequence of goals, objectives, and associated tasks to address their identified problem of practice. Because of the diversity in our students' research interests, this chapter naturally takes on a flexible format to accommodate the particular shape of the problem of practice, research design, and collaborations the student has undertaken. Ultimately, chapter two provides candidates the opportunity to begin the work of organizational change as their analyses of the data collected directly inform the initial action plan, constituting another key step in the cyclical process of action research.

Chapter three encompasses an extended discussion, and when possible a partial implementation, of the action plan emerging from the dissertation study. The third chapter leans heavily on the candidate's emerging experience as a scholar-practitioner to generate and launch a well-defined and practically feasible action plan, based on the action research study results reported in chapter two and grounded in the student's perspective on their own collaborative leadership practice. Successful concluding chapters include a detailed description of collaborative organizational change efforts, along with a reflection on the candidate's leadership practice in developing and implementing the action plan. Students discuss short-, medium-, and long-term plans, stakeholder engagement, resources needed, and suggested timelines. Stemming from our program's emphasis on the integration of practical and research knowledge to address problems of practice, this final chapter illuminates our students' abilities to synthesize leadership and organizational change theory in concert with research to guide their plans.

Because all DiP studies within our program use an action research methodology, we stress *collaboration* as students compose their action plans to affect change within their organizations, and as they strive for a continuation of the action research cycle post-graduation. Like Donohoo et al. (2018), we believe a collective efficacy approach to the design, implementation, and evaluation of an action plan has the potential to influence student and organizational achievement. Collaboration, therefore, is an influential skill for scholar-practitioners and a practice we wish to impart to our students as they seek or continue to lead an organization.

Upon reflection, we believe our three-chapter dissertation model is on a trajectory to address what Archbald (2008) claims as priorities of the contemporary DiP. Although we have encountered challenges, which we explore further below, our model's adaptability to students' unique organizational settings and problems of practice is particularly useful when embarking on organizational change through an action research approach. In addition, we believe our curriculum and field-based opportunities have significantly contributed to our students' engagement with *inquiry as practice*. These applied experiences combine and reinforce each other in practice and in turn strengthen candidates' leadership abilities, and this becomes evident in their dissertation chapters. As exemplars of these aims and principles at work, we next present the research and experiences of two recent graduates.

RECENT GRADUATE EXPERIENCES

As a way to explore how these intentions and characteristics play out in practice, two coauthors, recent graduates of the program, recount their experiences with the three-chapter DiP model.

Faithe Beam, EdD: A Study on Black Placemaking at a Faith-Based PWI

My DiP focused on a critical participatory action research study (Fine & Torre, 2021) of college students' experiences with Black placemaking (Tichavakunda, 2024) and student success. The study explored Black students' lived experiences and interpretation of those experiences at a predominantly White faith-based institution. Black placemaking focuses on how Black students and professionals create meaningful and dynamic sites of resilience and belonging (Hunter et al., 2016). Study findings suggested that while participants valued the place-centered identity of the institution, they also identified needs related to supporting students through opportunities and practices that represent who they are.

For example, participants reflected on their collegiate experience with vulnerability and honesty about their hopes to have *places* like the Divine Nine that provide an opportunity to be part of the legacy of their parents and grandparents. They also spoke about their responsibility to nurture places for growth and pride for students who will come after them. Participants underscored further that university leaders must take the initiative to create and sustain these opportunities. The action plan discussed in chapter three reflected the communicative space created during the research phase between and among multiple participants. This communicative space cultivated a growing level of trust and a willingness among the students to invest beyond telling their stories to a collective process of change.

The action plan focused on belonging and thriving for Black students through a mentorship pilot and a feasibility study of bringing a Black Greek Letter Organization (BGLO) to campus, goals identified by participants. However, because of the creative and collective efforts of Black students with staff members and other stakeholders in the campus community, neither a pilot nor feasibility study was necessary. Both objectives are coming to fruition in organic ways not articulated in the original action plan. For example, the research process generated curiosity within our community and a BGLO reached out to the institution to inquire about chartering an organization on campus. The chapter spent time with students and generated enough interest to begin the chartering process. These steps reflect the power of the Black placemaking framework and the agency and fortitude of Black students to create places that fully represent and celebrate who they are (Tichavakunda, 2024). The communicative space of the research process offered hope (and some evidence) that the institution was listening and was willing to facilitate processes and structures that reflect equity for all students.

Engaging this DiP model illuminated my leadership practices of listening and facilitation, but even moreso my responsibility for self-examination and growth as a higher education practitioner and administrator who is racialized as White, and as a collaborator in change efforts on campus. My journey to the UD EdD program came at an inflection point as students of color at my institution were speaking with urgency about concerns of their campus experience, and I was shifting from university minister to senior administrator in student life. Influenced by the university's Christian mission, our institution has a tradition of building a close-knit community and sense of place, and many of our students talk about this as a distinctive aspect of their experience. We are also a predominately White institution, and I was interested to learn more about how students of color experienced a sense of place at the university, especially its impact on their sense of belonging. My review of the literature started with "sense of place" and eventually led me to Black placemaking. The collaborative action research approach (CPAR) I employed (Fine & Torre, 2021) nurtured an environment where individuals and groups connected in generative ways—and with the hope of being seen and heard by the university's administration—to ask challenging questions, share honestly, and build trust in a collective process.

While the action plan was not utilized in its original form, the space in which it was created generated a growing institutional commitment to action and potential for Black placemaking to flourish. The three-chapter scholar-practitioner DiP entails work with both collaborative action research and critical action and reflection on my own leadership, including collaboration within the context of my institution. In summary, it provided an opportunity to make these collaborations and actions a part of the DiP experience.

Rachel Santos, EdD: Undocumented Students' Experiences under Indiana's Restriction on Resident Tuition

My DiP examined the challenges undocumented students face as they navigate college pathways despite Indiana state law barring them from accessing in-state tuition rates. This study assessed the multifaceted financial and emotional obstacles undocumented students encountered and their practices of resilience in overcoming them. Utilizing the three-chapter model, this research resulted in an actionable plan that outlined the steps needed at the advocacy level, and the steps required by higher education institutions, to address the trauma and burden on mental health caused by this law and other inequitable immigration policies nationally and locally. The three-chapter DiP format facilitated a comprehensive exploration of a problem of practice that was tied to my role as an education policy advocate in Indiana. It allowed me to examine my organization's position and its efficacy in driving public policy changes within the state.

Entering UD's EdD program, my aim was to bridge my background in public policy with my expertise in education and knowledge of Latino student success. As the director of Education Policy for the Indiana Latino Institute, I integrated my daily professional work into my academic work, leading to personal and professional growth. Through this journey, I improved my ability to set measurable goals in practice and adeptly utilize tools, such as the logic model, to discern the inputs necessary for advancing policy issues, ultimately leading to tangible outputs such as legislative changes or increased public support for issues.

The three-chapter scholar-practitioner DiP model is also methodologically strong because it inserts the researcher into the work, fostering opportunities for reflection regarding their identity and positionality in the research process. Researchers who concurrently serve as community leaders and are deeply invested in effecting transformative change within their communities stand to benefit significantly from this approach. It provides a platform to document and analyze the very work they engage in daily, similar to the role of street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) as described by Lipsky (2010).

Lipsky's concept of SLBs explains the pivotal role of individuals who directly interact with and serve the community, paralleling the essential function of educators in our society. When reading my DiP, you can see traces of my experience as an SLB, as well as a deep connection to the community it aims to serve. This lends an authenticity to the work that is often absent in more traditional dissertations. Before embarking on this program and developing my DiP, I had earned both a bachelor's and a master's degree, but neither program required me to reflect on my lived experience and its impact on my role as a researcher. Including these reflections in my DiP allows my readers to not only understand the research more deeply but also to hear my voice, which ultimately strengthens the work.

Since completing the DiP, I can reflect on the problem presented and affirm that, while legislative changes may not have passed in Indiana, the first subsequent legislative session witnessed a notable increase in support from major companies and the state's higher education institutions. The journey underscores the reality that effecting change often surpasses the projected timeline, yet the strength of the plan remains steadfast. It stands as a blueprint, empowering any advocate to adopt it and commence their own advocacy endeavors or contribute to the ongoing dialogue. Approaching a year since submitting my final DIP edits, I am confident that this holistic approach to the DiP enables emerging scholar-practitioners to deal with problems that go beyond just one person or organization.

CHALLENGES

In the course of implementing the three-chapter scholar-practitioner DiP, we have encountered important challenges related to committee expectations and evaluation, as well as curricular challenges with implications for the DiP. The latter category has hinged partly on faculty's varied interpretations of relevant program design components. Moreover, although social justice leadership principles and organizational theory were embedded in our curriculum, students' DiP logic models and action plans sometimes lacked the collaborative leadership approach envisioned by the program's signature pedagogy. Students encountered logistical and substantive challenges as well, including barriers within their organizations, as they worked to implement their action plans.

Committees, Expectations, and Evaluation

One set of challenges pertained to the selection of committee members, and subsequently to committee members' expectations. In our program, three-member DiP committees consist of a full-time UD faculty member as chair, a second faculty member from UD, and an external committee member who holds a terminal degree and can provide practical expertise relevant to the students' problem of practice. Although students select the external committee members in consultation with the committee chair, it can be challenging to find someone who is a good fit for the student and their topic. For example, a prospective member with practical expertise, who works in the student's organization or field, will often be ineligible because of the requirement that the external member have a terminal degree. Students may appeal to the department chair for an exception to the terminal degree requirement, but they typically do not. Consequently, external members often hold an academic role at a college or university, and students and committees may often miss out on inclusion of practical and contextual expertise. Moreover, committee expectations and evaluations may sometimes overemphasize academic and research priorities more aligned with traditional five-chapter dissertations at the expense of attention to application in chapter three.

A DiP chair and the "second" member, typically another member of our program faculty, come to the evaluation of student DiP with an understanding of characteristics and aims of the three-chapter scholar-practitioner DiP model. However, the external member needs to be introduced to the format and learning goals associated with our program and DiP model. Even with an introduction of this kind, some external committee members may retain expectations and implicit evaluative criteria that are aligned with traditional five-chapter dissertations. They may balk at the length of the DiP, or chapter three's focus on action and leadership practice. For example, faculty colleagues in our program can cite multiple examples of external members (1) voicing concerns about aspects of students' DiP (action orientation; a focus on the specific organization; a focus on leadership practice) that we would consider strengths and (2) making suggestions that would result in a traditional academic five-chapter dissertation. Some external members expressed reservations about associating their names with what they saw as a condensed dissertation. These situations have all come to a positive end, but not without added work for DiP chairs as they advocated for our process, and additional stress for students as well. This challenge is a result of our adoption of the nontraditional model for the DiP, and our experiences echo similar tensions described in the literature (Storey et al., 2015; Swank et al., 2021).

A related challenge likewise reflects an important thread in the literature on the purposes of DiP writing in the EdD. Scholars in the field debate the role of idiography versus generalizability in EdD research (Storey & Hesbol, 2016). The three-chapter DiP model centers action research and is tailored to address a problem of practice in a specific organization. While this can be true of traditional five-chapter dissertations as well, the specificity of the research questions, results, and action plan (including who is involved, resources needed, anticipated time needed, etc.) means that study findings can be difficult to extrapolate to other organizations. However, this is not itself understood as a negative point. The goal is to address the problem of practice within the site organization, rather than to produce generalizable knowledge. Nevertheless, all results contribute to the knowledge in the field, and one advantage of the action research methodology at the center of our model is that the process for organizational change is detailed and contextually relevant, providing road maps and suggestions for various change processes in various types of organizations. The action plans can be catalysts to change for other practitioners who may see an opportunity to adapt findings, insights, or implications to their own organizational context. Committee members' expectations and evaluations can be complicated by this tension as well.

Programmatic Challenges

In addition, yet not surprising when initiating new programs, programmatic challenges have also emerged. These included (1) faculty's understanding and adoption of our program's signature pedagogy and (2) unexpected faculty workload.

Signature Pedagogy

Subscribing to CPED principles, our program is grounded in *social justice* as our signature pedagogy. Although faculty have demonstrated knowledge of and commitment to social justice as a central organizing idea for the program, course syllabi and pedagogical practices have integrated its elements unevenly during the program's first five years. Consequently, students' research foci have varied, from traditional action research conducted in classrooms, such as the impact of chemistry lab experiences on high-stakes testing (Tindall, 2023), to more signature pedagogy-aligned studies of diversity, equity, and inclusion (Jackson, 2023; Jenkins, 2023; Singh, 2023).

To strengthen our pedagogical approach, faculty initiated a curriculum mapping effort in 2022 entitled *EdD Evaluation 2024*. It includes all program courses, documenting their alignment to CPED and social justice principles, program goals, and student learning outcomes. On our horizon remain (1) implementation of course and program changes and (2) the creation of a course review/revision cycle timeline, including a potential curriculum quality assurance team to oversee these critical program elements. Perhaps most important is the finalization of our curriculum map and its alignment to social justice principles later this year. With more consistent engagement with social justice across courses, we believe not only that more candidates will focus their DiPs on problems of practice with social justice implications, but also that all candidates will feel more prepared to situate their action plans and their own leadership practice within social justice aims. In this way, we expect these steps and revisions to result in a clarified focus on social justice in student DiPs, and a deepened sense of reflective practice and social justice leadership in students' third chapters in particular.

Faculty Workload

Embarking on a new, online EdD in Leadership for Organizations in the fall of 2019, our administration and faculty focused on enrollment and sustainability during its initial design. This led to promising enrollment numbers yet surprising challenges regarding faculty workload. While enrollment was meeting program goals with regard to recruitment and admissions, these enrollment numbers, combined with some unanticipated student needs and an accelerated program of study, translated into unexpectedly high demands on faculty doctoral advisors. The hope, originally, was that shifting to a three-chapter scholar-practitioner DiP would streamline our doctoral advising to a significant degree when compared to the traditional five-chapter dissertation; the reduced scope of the research portion, shorter overall dissertation length, and the greater level of structure provided by the format and the DiP handbook gave us reason to believe this would be the case. In practice, however, the features of the model were not sufficient to overcome the intensity of increased doctoral advising while simultaneously managing our traditional faculty responsibilities (i.e., teaching, service, and scholarship). We believe that implementing a consistent structure for the DiP created some important efficiencies for the program. However, each EdD candidate and each DiP is unique, and it is unrealistic to expect these strategies to either (1) address all advising challenges that emerge or (2) support scaling up beyond sustainable student-to-chair ratios that allow for depth, responsiveness, and excellence in doctoral advising.

Fortunately, faculty and administrators have collaborated in recent semesters to address faculty concerns regarding student-to-chair ratios. Through negotiations of faculty responsibilities, compensation, and policy amendments, we have moved toward lower ratios and more equitable and sustainable practices in DiP advising. As faculty, we appreciate the progress achieved so far, as we strive to maintain a nurturing and reciprocal experience between the doctoral student and dissertation chair (Bell-Ellison, & Dedrick, 2008).

Preparing Scholar-Practitioners: Leading from a Place of Influence

Still another challenge emerged, as we learned that a significant portion of our students are not in positions to affect change directly within their organizations. Whether employed in business, non-profit, military, or education fields, students often do not have the authority to initiate change within their organizations. In some instances, depending on the complexity of their problem of practice, students may struggle even to gain the attention of those who do. In these cases, they are consequently unable to comprehensively share the implications of their studies. As a result, action plans may too often be hypothetical and self-composed by students, rather than the collective and collaborative effort we envisioned for our program. Because of this, we encourage our students to approach their research as well as the implications from a place of influence. Through this approach, we believe they can affect their immediate environment in ways they deem most ethical and influential. And although the change they may have strived for in their initial action plan may not be attained as first envisioned, they have taken a major step towards introducing and commencing an action research cycle within their immediate world of work. Returning to our goals for the DiP as a capstone experience specifically designed to prepare scholar-practitioners, we believe that introducing these frameworks and strategies for navigating applied leadership practice in real organizations brings our process closer to CPED principles and to our goals for the program.

CONCLUSION

This manuscript explored an alternative three-chapter DiP format with a balanced focus on (1) an action research study conducted by the candidate and (2) the candidate's application of findings, alongside social and organizational theory, in their leadership practice. We believe readers of this special issue will benefit from the article, as it describes the authors' first-hand perspectives navigating this model as students and faculty. In this way, our discussion adds to the emerging landscape of practice regarding EdD dissertations. In addition, the two DiP exemplars and reflections from recent graduates included above may further assist current and rising CPED programs considering alternative dissertation models, as a vehicle for preparing scholar-practitioners grounded in inquiry as practice, applied leadership, and a signature pedagogy.

As a limitation of our discussion, it is important to note that what we have shared throughout this essay reflects our own experiences. Other candidates' and colleagues' experiences and perceptions may naturally be different from ours. In conclusion, we summarize key points based on our experiences described above and outline eight recommendations for programs who might be considering adopting an alternative model for the dissertation-in-practice.

Implications for EdD programs

Considering we are now in our fifth year and categorized according to the CPED framework as an *experienced* program, we believe we have much to share with institutions wishing to embark on a journey implementing an alternative DiP format specifically prioritizing the preparation of scholar-practitioners. Implications from our discussion above include the following:

1. Signature pedagogy: Ensure all faculty have a concrete understanding of your signature pedagogy, including how to embed it in both curriculum and classroom practice. The work of Zambo (2011) may help mobilize that understanding.

2. Map your curriculum: Ground your degree program, especially if accelerated, in a curriculum that helps scaffold the students' scholar-practitioner experience. Introduce, apply, and reinforce key concepts, theories, techniques, and methods, especially those related to the program's signature pedagogy by applying wisdom from Bloom's taxonomy (Preville, 2023) or other teaching and learning theories.

3. Calibrate dissertation expectations among faculty: Consistent discussions among faculty teams ensure research expectations and dissertations meet the expectations of all faculty. Without such understanding, students will be confused as to what to expect throughout each step of their academic journeys. Storey and colleagues (2015) may serve as a source for considering this faculty alignment of thought and goals.

4. On-board external committee members: It is worthwhile to make sure that external committee members understand the aims of your DiP model and how they may shape what the proposals and final dissertations may look like. Recognizing that external committee members naturally come to the process with their own implicit expectations surrounding the evaluation of dissertations, a streamlined but explicit discussion of how the alternative DiP model may depart from those expectations—sometimes by design—will help to avoid misaligned evaluations later in the process.

5. Contextualize the mechanics of action research: Consider each student's social location. How does their current position at work place them in a position of influence? Knowing this will help with the construction of a comprehensive action research design, collaborative development and implementation of an action plan, and firmly setting the pace for an action research cycle within the site organization.

6. Emphasize collaboration and the benefits of collective efficacy for candidates creating an action plan: Hattie's (2015) extensive work in this field helps us understand the impact of highly efficacious individuals when they work collectively and collaboratively.

7. Investigate and adopt a staffing formula that is conducive to both student and faculty success: Aim for a successful experience for both students and faculty. Lean on literature (Lowrey et al., 2015; O'Meara et al., 2020) to arrive at ratios conducive to what students and faculty deem important to the dissertation experience.

8. Adopt a formal evaluation of the program: From recruitment to commencement, each step of the doctoral experience merits an evaluation like those employed by Student Affairs/Development offices (Wells, 2023). Without such organizational practice in place, the work will continuously seem reactionary— in other words, a sense of *always putting out fires*. More importantly, goals associated with student learning and program success may seem unattainable without reliance on a comprehensive evaluation system.

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