

Understanding the Problem of Practice: An Analysis of Professional Practice EdD Dissertations

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ABSTRACT

Investigating a “problem of practice” is a signature feature of the EdD dissertation. Yet, little is known about how doctoral students derive their problems, the nature of the problems they study, and the impact studying problems of practice has on students’ local contexts. The purpose of this study was to investigate EdD students’ problems of practice through document analysis of 28 dissertations completed in one EdD program at a large, research-intensive university. Findings revealed that problems are derived from doctoral students’ felt difficulties and real-world dilemmas in three main categories: supporting marginalized students, increasing the quality of educator professional development, and supporting novices’ entry into the profession. Furthermore, five generic themes that describe the types of impact dissertation studies had on students’ local contexts are reported. Based on findings, four guidelines to assist EdD students in deriving problems of practice are offered.

Keywords: professional practice doctorate, dissertation experience, problem of practice, doctoral education

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, discussion of the education doctorate has received heightened attention in the literature (Guthrie, 2009; Neumann, 2005; Shulman, Golde, Bueschel, & Garabedian, 2006). Much of this discussion has argued for distinguishing the PhD program (designed to prepare educational researchers for positions in higher education) from the EdD or Professional Practice Doctoral Program (designed to cultivate the leadership abilities of practicing professionals who wish to remain in the school system and tackle problems of practice in their local settings). Many institutions of higher education have attempted to translate these conceptual ideas on the educational doctorate from the literature into practice by designing and launching new and unique professional practice doctoral programs through their participation in the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (Perry & Imig, 2008).

As new programs have been launched, it is not surprising that distinguishing the dissertation experience for students in professional practice doctoral programs from the dissertation experience of PhD students has presented a challenge for faculty responsible for program design and development. For example, Andrews and Grogan (2005) in their manuscript, “Form should follow function:

Removing the EdD dissertation from the PhD straight jacket,” asserted that the PhD dissertation format has done more to hinder than help EdD programs to provide practitioners with the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and dispositions needed to lead effectively in educational settings.

In response to the call to reconceptualize the dissertation experience for EdD students, many professional practice doctoral programs have experimented with and studied alternative dissertation formats to the dissertation experience. Creative examples from published sources include replacing the traditional dissertation experience with (a) a team-produced, client-consultant oriented culminating report (Smrekar & McGraner, 2009); (b) a thematic dissertation that asks students to explore a common topic (Marsh & Dembo, 2009); (c) a portfolio of individual and collaboratively produced writing projects (Browne-Ferrigno & Jensen, 2012; Maxwell & Kupczyk-Romanczuk, 2009); (d) creation of a project and project report (Everson, 2009); and (e) an action research or practitioner inquiry dissertation (Adams, Bondy, Ross, Dana, & Kennedy-Lewis, 2014; Wetzal & Ewbanks, 2013).

While formats and emphasis for EdD dissertations vary across institutions, a defining feature that distinguishes them from PhD



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dissertations is that they target a problem of practice (PoP). According to the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED), an organization of over 80 institutions committed to establishing quality EdD programs, a PoP “is a persistent, contextualized, and specific issue embedded in the work of a professional practitioner, the addressing of which has the potential to result in improved understanding, experience, and outcomes” (CPED, n.d., Design-Concepts section, para. 6). Yet, as institutions across the nation engage students in dissertation research that focuses on PoPs, there has been little documentation of what constitutes a PoP, the nature of it, and the impact studying it can have on a doctoral student’s local context.

Analyzing PoPs

Our institution, a Research I university located in the southeast of the United States, offers an online professional practice EdD program focused on curriculum, teaching, and teacher education. Launched in 2010, the program admits a cohort of 20-25 students every other year. To date, 28 students have completed professional practice dissertations and graduated since the program’s inception. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the ways PoPs grounded our graduates’ dissertation experience, distinguishing it from the PhD dissertation experience. As such, the following research questions guided this study:

1. How do EdD students derive their PoP?
2. What is the nature of these PoPs that our students have studied?
3. What are the reported impacts the PoPs have on doctoral students’ local contexts?

We begin this paper with a brief review of the literature to contextualize our study, noting the long history of the dissertation in doctoral programs and summarizing recent studies done to better understand the dissertation experience in both PhD and EdD programs. Next, we describe our EdD program with particular attention given to the theoretical framework underpinning the program and, therefore, the analysis of the dissertations produced within it. We then share our methodology and findings organized by the three research questions named above. Finally, based on our analysis and findings, we conclude with suggested guidelines for EdD students in professional practice doctoral programs as they name, frame, and study PoPs as a part of the capstone dissertation experience for the attainment of their EdD degree.

Literature Review: The Doctoral Dissertation

The construct of a doctoral dissertation is age-old, dating back to 1861 when Yale University granted the first Doctor of Philosophy degrees to three students after they completed “two years of graduate study, passing final examinations in several fields, and submitting written dissertations” (Storr, 1953 as cited in Thurgood, Golladay, & Hill, 2006, p. 4). In the field of education, a PhD dissertation can be traced back to the early 1890’s when the first PhD degree was granted at Teachers College, Columbia University. Over time, the dissertation, defined as “a formal document that demonstrates [students’] ability to conduct research that makes an original contribution to theory or practice” (Roberts, 2010, p. 18), grew in form and function, becoming commonplace as the culminating experience in the attainment of a PhD degree (e.g., Monaghan, 1989; Walker, 2008).

Distinct from the PhD degree is the EdD degree, a relatively new phenomenon that was first granted at Harvard University in 1920 (Shulman, et al., 2006). Over time this degree, meant to meet the needs of practicing professionals, became less and less distinguishable from the PhD, until Shulman (2006) called for a more careful examination of the EdD experience, recasting it as a professional practice doctorate:

The professional practice doctorate that we propose would be an extremely demanding, rigorous, respectable, high-level academic experience that prepares students for service as leading practitioners in the field of education, whether as educational leaders—principals, superintendents, policy coordinators, curriculum coordinators, and so forth—or as educators of teachers and other school personnel. We argue that preparation as a scholar in the traditional sense, culminating in a doctoral dissertation, is not the best way to prepare the superintendent of schools for a California community or a teacher-educator who will be preparing teachers of mathematics for that same community. We need a degree that is positively and intentionally designed to serve the needs of professional practice—as the EdD was originally intended to do, but no longer does. (p. 29)

As institutions across the nation heeded Shulman’s call to reconceptualize the EdD to serve the needs of professional practice, discussion and debate emerged about the dissertation experience for the EdD student (e.g., Archbald, 2008; Murphy, & Vriesenga, 2005), with several researchers turning their gaze to the study of the dissertation experience, comparing and contrasting dissertations produced in both the PhD and EdD programs.

For example, Nelson and Coorough (1994) examined 1,007 PhD and 960 EdD dissertations from “Dissertation abstracts international” from 1950–1990 to compare these two types of dissertations in relationship to characteristics such as research design, statistical analysis, significance of results, and types of research (i.e., basic vs. applied). They found over the time period examined that there was a very small percentage of qualitative research for both PhD and EdD dissertations. Meanwhile, the EdD dissertations were in “greater reliance on descriptive research (primarily the survey)” (p.163) and most prevailing in educational administration research. They found no difference in the incidence of significant findings or in the basic-applied research continuum.

Similar to the study completed by Nelson and Coorough (1994), Walker and Haley-Mize (2012) adopted a content analysis to compare PhD and EdD dissertations from 1997 to 2010 with a narrower focus on the content area of special education. Their study examined gender of authors, age of the participants, target population, area of exceptionality, along with those Nelson and Coorough (1994) investigated (i.e., research design, statistical analysis, significance of results). Findings of this analysis showed that there was no difference in the percentage of dissertations in special education by degree type (i.e., PhD vs. EdD), type of research (i.e., applied vs. basic), or gender. However, substantial differences existed in the variables of research design, statistics, target populations, significance of results, age of participants, and exceptionality category. Specifically, while PhD dissertations tended to use “correlational, experimental, and single-participant research designs” (p. 205), EdD dissertations drew more heavily on qualitative research designs. In addition, a large number of PhD dissertations were conducted using school-age participants, whereas more EdD dissertations were conducted with adult participants.



As studies were being conducted that compared PhD and EdD dissertations, other studies looked at EdD dissertations exclusively (Belzer & Ryan, 2013; Dawson & Kumar, 2014; Storey et al., 2015). One such study, completed by Dawson and Kumar (2014), shared the result of their scrutiny of EdD dissertations in an online educational technology program, analyzing the first 23 dissertations completed by their graduates to assess the ways guiding program principles played out in those dissertations. Based on their analysis, the researchers revised the principles and provided recommendations for other online programs in educational technology.

One year after the publication of the Dawson and Kumar study (2014), Storey et al. (2015) published a study reviewing 25 dissertations submitted in 2013 for CPED Dissertation in Practice (DiP) Award. This study sought to determine if EdD program dissertations had changed because of institutional membership in CPED and their re-design effort. Results showed that although there were changes in the dissertation process for EdD students compared to traditional approaches to PhD dissertation work, few changes occurred in the final dissertation product. The majority of dissertations reviewed fell into a traditional five-chapter, single-authored format. While all award submissions addressed immediate needs in practice, they indicated that most CPED institutions were not certain what an exemplary EdD dissertation looked like as little evidence of impact on local practice was reported in many of the dissertations submitted for this award. Based on these findings, the authors raised concerns about the distinctiveness of professional practice doctorates in education and what the phrase “creation of generative knowledge” (p. 14) means for EdD dissertations.

While providing insights about the EdD dissertation experience in general, both the Dawson and Kumar (2014) and Storey et al. (2015) studies did not focus on the notion of a PoP within an EdD dissertation specifically. In contrast, a study by Belzer and Ryan (2013) investigated the PoP as it was depicted in dissertations by their first cohort of graduates from an interdisciplinary, school-wide EdD program. Similar to our study, Belzer and Ryan’s work endeavored to clarify what is meant by a PoP and how the study of PoPs distinguishes an EdD dissertation from a PhD dissertation. Looking across 21 dissertation abstracts, the authors named three categories representing their students’ research questions related to PoPs: (1) questions that evaluate an initiative or policy that is already in place; (2) questions that ask what happens when students implement an initiative to solve a problem and improve outcomes; and (3) questions that seek to describe current conditions as a way to generate, appropriate, and contextualize solutions to problems. While similar in nature to Belzer and Ryan’s work, our study contributes to the literature by examining the entire text of 28 dissertations, looking beyond the research questions articulated in a dissertation abstract to describe PoPs, how they are derived, and the impact studying them can have for EdD students. Hence, our study complements and extends the work of Belzer and Ryan.

Theoretical Framework

As a member of CPED, we designed our doctoral program using the perspectives outlined by that organization. As such, our program:

1. Is framed around questions of equity, ethics, and social justice to bring about solutions to complex PoPs.

2. Prepares leaders who can construct and apply knowledge to make a positive difference in the lives of individuals, families, organizations, and communities.
3. Provides opportunities for candidates to develop and demonstrate collaboration and communication skills to work with diverse communities and to build partnerships.
4. Provides field-based opportunities to analyze PoPs and use multiple frames to develop meaningful solutions.
5. Is grounded in and develops a professional knowledge base that integrates both practical and research knowledge, that links theory with systemic and systematic inquiry.
6. Emphasizes the generation, transformation, and use of professional knowledge and practice (CPED, 2014, Working Principles section, para. 5).

Program Description

Guided by CPED principles, the overarching goal of our program is to cultivate students’ skills as practitioner scholars, professionals who use theoretical, pedagogical, and research expertise to name, frame, and study PoPs and lead informed change in their schools and districts. In addition to CPED principles, to conceptualize this EdD program we drew heavily on Boyer’s (1990) broadened notions of scholarship where the scholarship of teaching, application, and integration hold value alongside more traditional notions of the scholarship of discovery (typical in PhD programs). We sought to create a program that was different from our PhD program and which respected the value that informed insiders bring to educational change. Our online program was designed as job-embedded professional learning (Croft, Coggs, Dolan, Powers, & Killion, 2010; Webster-Wright, 2010) using a framework of situated learning (Putnam & Borko, 2000) that recognizes cognition as situated, social, and distributed. Students use their own contexts as intentional sites of inquiry where they investigate PoPs, situating theory from coursework into their daily practice. Building on the social and distributed aspects of cognition, students complete coursework in cohorts and collaborate in research support groups throughout the dissertation process. Students are also required to attend summer institutes on campus during the first three summers of the program in order to strengthen the learning community.

Like many PhD programs, our program unfolds in three phases over 3 to 4 years: coursework, qualifying exams, and dissertation, but each phase is distinctive from PhD study in focus and purpose. In the first phase, students enroll with their cohort members in two highly interactive online classes each fall, spring, and summer semester for the first two years of study. Coursework begins in the summer with two foundational classes focused on educational research and our program’s focus—curriculum, teaching, and teacher education. Classes follow in practitioner research, professional development, critical pedagogy, teacher leadership, teaching children in poverty, school change, and qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. All classes are primarily asynchronous in nature and focus on structured discussion of pertinent readings as students connect what they are learning to their full-time work as teachers and administrators. The students’ work settings serve as a laboratory of practice (Shulman, 2006) and course assignments require students to apply what they learn in

coursework immediately to their local contexts. Students often collect and analyze data to reflect on the ways what they are learning in coursework translates into their practice. Students have multiple opportunities to then compare and contrast what they are learning regarding knowledge for-, in-, and of-practice, the three sources of knowledge practitioners need to make lasting and effective changes to their practice as described by Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1999). Knowledge for-practice refers to educators becoming informed about new research-based practices that have legitimized their worth. Knowledge in-practice refers to educators applying knowledge for-practice to their work in schools, adapting as needed to address the unique circumstances and situations inherent in their local school contexts. Knowledge of-practice refers to educators making “problematic their own knowledge and practice as well as the knowledge and practice of others” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 273) by systematically naming, framing, and studying PoPs. As our students share what they are learning regarding knowledge for-, in-, and of-practice, they develop strong collaborative working relationships with one another despite their individual geographic location. Over time, these relationships enable students to serve as critical friends for one another, as they discuss their daily work as educators honestly and openly, and push each other’s thinking and practice in relationship to program goals. In addition to intensive online interaction, an on-campus, one week long June Institute is held each summer where students meet to discuss the content of courses and work in small research groups of five to six students advised by a team of two faculty members to progress through qualifying exams and dissertation.

Qualifying Exams and Dissertation

The major written task associated with qualifying exams is the production of a dissertation prospectus of approximately 25 to 30 pages that outlines the plans for the student’s dissertation research, a study of a PoP in their local context. This task helps our students move right into their practitioner research study following qualifying exams taken during the third fall semester in the program because it is heavily tied to their current job/position/context, and we want to time their studies, so they are able to collect data within the same school year in which their study was designed (their third spring semester enrolled in the program). Other pieces of the exam include:

1. A biosketch detailing their journey in becoming practitioner scholars.
2. A paper describing shifts in thinking/actions that have occurred over time in their practice as a result of experiences in our program.
3. A presentation (oral only) that demonstrates their work as practitioner scholars.

Students work on the dissertation prospectus and the other components of the qualifying exams named above within their research group with support from a faculty advisor for approximately one semester and subsequently come to campus for a 90-minute oral examination. If passed, students are admitted to doctoral candidacy and proceed with their proposed dissertation research. Time to complete dissertation study varies by student, but typically falls within a six to eight months’ timeframe, at which time students again return to campus for a second 90-minute oral defense by the student’s committee of the dissertation-in-practice. Analysis of the written dissertation product produced by students is the focus of this study.

METHODOLOGY

Document analysis was used as the method to gain insights into the research questions. Document analysis is a “systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic material” (Bowen, 2009, p. 27), which requires “data selection, instead of data collection” (p. 31). According to Bowen (2009), advantages of document analysis include high efficiency, availability, cost-effectiveness, stability, exactness, coverage, and lack of obtrusiveness and reactivity. Though Bowen (2009) cautions that document analysis is not always advantageous as there are three potential flaws inherent in the process—(a) low retrievability, (b) biased selectivity, and (c) insufficient detail, this study addressed these limitations by selecting to review *every* dissertation produced in our program in its *entirety*.

As stated earlier, the research questions that guided this study were threefold: (1) How do EdD students derive their PoPs?; (2) What is the nature of these PoPs that our students have studied?; and (3) What are the reported impacts the study of PoPs have on doctoral students’ local contexts? To explore the nature and content of EdD students’ PoPs studied for their dissertation experiences within a professional practice doctoral program, our primary source of data included all of the dissertations that had been completed in our program since its inception in 2010 ($n=28$). The analysis of these dissertations began with the first author of this paper, who was not related in any way to the production of these dissertations (i.e., served as dissertation chair or committee member), conducted an independent reading of each study, creating a spreadsheet that included dissertation title, professional role of dissertation author, PoP, purpose statement, research questions, data, findings, and impact on practice. Next, each member of the research team read a subset of the dissertations and checked the spreadsheet created by the first author for agreement with the published dissertation document. Any discrepancies in the ways the dissertations were represented in the spreadsheet were discussed and debated with the entire research team until a consensus on each dissertation component representation was reached. Finally, as a form of member-checking (Patton, 2002), we sent the spreadsheet description of each individual dissertation to the dissertation author, asking the author to confirm if our representation of his/her dissertation in the spreadsheet was accurate. Out of our 28 EdD graduates, 24 responded to our member-checking request. They either confirmed the accuracy of the information on the spreadsheet or made minor revisions.

Once a dissertation summary chart was complete using the procedure discussed above, the first three authors independently read and re-read the constructed summary chart to prepare for coding using an inductive approach (Hatch, 2002). During this process, we set out “to organize and group similarly coded data into categories or ‘families’ because they share some characteristic—the beginning of a pattern.” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 8). This method of analysis is in line with what Bowen (2009) suggests that document analysis requires—a combination of elements of content analysis (organizing information into categories related to the central questions of the research) and thematic analysis (a careful, more focused re-reading and review of the data).

Throughout the readings and re-readings and coding process, the research team communicated multiple times either face to face or virtually, creating opportunities for multiple analysts to share, discuss and debate patterns emerging in the review of the



dissertations (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). Throughout these meetings, the research team moved through cycles of discussion, analysis, further discussion, and reanalysis until we reached agreement on the research findings. Analyst triangulation and member-checking enhanced the trustworthiness and credibility of this study (Patton, 2002).

FINDINGS

Research Question #1: How Do EdD Students Derive their Problems of Practice (PoPs)?

Across the 28 dissertations analyzed, all of our students' PoP derived from a "felt difficulty" or "real-world dilemma" they faced in their local contexts. We define a "felt difficulty" as a deep concern or dissatisfaction upon which the practitioner felt an urge to take action. For example, a district literacy specialist felt that she was not meeting the needs of English Language Learners in terms of writing instruction in the schools where she worked (Christensen, 2014), and her dissertation was designed around taking specific actions to address that. Another example is from a special education teacher who realized that the Tier Three instructional support within a response-to-intervention framework might not have been the most effective way to meet student needs (Ammons, 2016). A third example is from a secondary music teacher who noticed a discrepancy between her female students' high musical performance in her class and their below-average academic performance in math and science classes (Harris, 2015). We viewed examples like these as "felt difficulties" because they were problems that our EdD students believed could be addressed through direct action in their dissertation research.

Different from students who derived their PoPs from a "felt difficulty," others derived their PoPs from "real-world dilemmas," which we define as a situation an educational practitioner faced where he/she had to navigate existing tensions to improve their

work. Different from "felt difficulties", these were problems situated in larger educational policy and procedures that created dilemmas for educators in their daily work. For example, one dilemma for a principal working at a large and diverse urban elementary school was that he had to deal with the frustrations his teachers faced as they struggled with implementing new state standards (Moss, 2015). A dilemma for a teacher working in a school committed to detracking (stop sorting students into different "tracks" based on their past academic performance or ability) high-school mathematics was simultaneously supporting struggling learners and challenging advanced learners in her detracked honors geometry classroom (Weller, 2016). Finally, one dilemma for an independent educational consultant/adjunct professor was negotiating conflicting views that existed among local practitioners and her colleagues regarding the effectiveness of the prevailing approach to professional development in high quality early childhood education (Pizano, 2016).

These "real-world dilemmas" and "felt difficulties" are intertwined, complex, authentic, and therefore, often messy. Table 1 provides an overview of all the dissertations we reviewed, including their titles, the professional role of the authors, and how we categorized the way PoPs were derived.

Table 1 indicates that across the 28 PoPs, 8 fell into the category of "felt difficulty," and the remaining 20 fell into the category of "real-world dilemma," perhaps indicating that unresolvable dilemmas are felt more often or more deeply by our EdD students than problems that they felt could be greatly alleviated or completely resolved. Regardless, less important than distinguishing between what constitutes a "felt difficulty" and what constitutes a "real-world dilemma" is the value these two constructs hold in helping EdD students derive a PoP. Table 1 reveals that felt difficulties and real-world dilemmas are pervasive across the practice of all educators regardless of their professional roles or context, and hence, can work as a mechanism for naming and framing a PoP for any EdD student regardless of their position or context.

Table 1: How EdD Students Derive Their POPs

Title of Dissertation	Author's Professional Role	PoP From ...	Author (Year)
Quality in early care and education: Multiple perspectives and critical considerations in a diverse context	a district grant director for early childhood education	a "real-world dilemma"	Altman (2016)
Understanding and designing teacher professional development for Universal Design for Learning (UDL): Analysis of UDL expert perspectives	an elementary special education teacher leader (elementary level)	a "felt difficulty"	Ammons (2015)
There is where I belong: Understanding teacher candidates' decision to work in high-poverty, urban schools	a clinical supervisor in a teacher education program	a "real-world dilemma"	Blaine (2016)
Coach's impact on early learning teachers' class scores	a professional development provider who leads coaching work across her state	a "real-world dilemma"	Burns (2015)
Using collaborative writing to help English Language Learners actualize the Common Core State Standards	an elementary district literacy specialist	a "felt difficulty"	Christensen (2014)
Constructing knowledge and practice of culturally responsive teaching in an early childhood context	an instructional leader	a "felt difficulty"	Conage (2014)



Responses of disengaged and minoritized Haitian American students in a 10th grade English/intensive reading class to the intentional use of culturally relevant literature	a 10th grade English and intensive reading teacher	a "felt difficulty"	Fishbein (2016)
Principals as instructional leadership coaches: School change through job embedded professional development	a lead professional development facilitator in her state	a "real-world dilemma"	Gibbs (2015)
The role of the music teacher in collaborating with academic teachers within a professional learning community	a performing arts teacher in a K-12 developmental research school	a "felt difficulty"	Harris (2015)
Perceptions of barriers to enrolling in advanced placement courses by high ability, high performing Black male high school students	a principal at an urban high school	a "real-world dilemma"	Hunter (2016)
The perspectives of novice principals in high-poverty, low-performing schools: Challenges faced and support need	a school district administrator	a "real-world dilemma"	Kirton (2014)
Coordinating support for new teachers in a Title I middle school	an intervention support specialist at a middle school	a "felt difficulty"	Knutowski (2014)
Helping teachers in a high poverty school move from a deficit to an asset orientation through professional development	a guidance counselor and an intervention specialist	a "real-world dilemma"	Latzke (2015)
The role of differentiation and standards-based grading in the science learning of struggling and advanced learners in a detracked high school honors biology classroom	a high school biology teacher	a "real-world dilemma"	MacDonald (2016)
Instructional leadership to enhance implementation of the common core state standards in secondary English	a district staff developer	a "real-world dilemma"	Mallory (2014)
Our children deserve this: Understanding highly effective teacher retention in hard to staff schools	a district administrator	a "real-world dilemma"	Martin (2016)
Facilitating culturally responsive classroom management professional development for novice teachers in an urban school	an instructional staff developer and new teacher mentor at a high-needs urban school	a "real-world dilemma"	Miccichi (2014)
The role of the school principal in establishing a school culture that embraces job embedded peer coaching as effective professional development	a school principal in a large and diverse urban elementary school	a "real-world dilemma"	Moss (2015)
Teaching reading to a student with blindness using universal design for learning: A practitioner inquiry	an elementary English Language Arts teacher	a "felt difficulty"	Mundorf (2014)
Professional development for early care and education in a diverse context: Multiple perspectives and critical considerations	an independent educational consultant and adjunct professor at a university	a "real-world dilemma"	Pizano (2016)
Informing educator professional development based on the school experiences of LGBTQ students	a literacy curriculum support specialist and school improvement specialist	a "real-world dilemma"	Robertson (2014)
A principal's reflection on using video to improve classroom	a principal of a mid-sized, urban elementary school	a "real-world dilemma"	Saccasyn (2015)
Understanding the successes and failures of African-American high school boys	an administrator in a drop-out prevention program	a "real-world dilemma"	Thomas (2014)
Understanding how to meet the needs of gifted and talented learners within a middle school push-in model: A practitioner research case study of one middle school student	a middle-school special education teacher leader	a "felt difficulty"	Van Boven (2015)
Closing the cultural gap: A Study of successful integration of Western teachers into Emirati school culture	a professional development specialist	a "real-world dilemma"	Vonderlind (2015)
Life in school: The academic identity stories of fifth grade African American boys	a principal at an urban elementary school	a "real-world dilemma"	Walsh (2015)



The role of differentiation and standards-based assessment in the mathematics learning of struggling and advanced learners in a detracked high school geometry classroom	a high school geometry teacher	a "real-world dilemma"	Weller (2016)
Successful district online teachers' perspectives of professional development	A school administrator	a "real-world dilemma"	Wiggins (2016)

Research Question #2: What Is the Nature of These Problems of Practice (PoPs) that Our Students Have Studied?

Across the 28 dissertations analyzed, PoPs fell into three main categories. These categories included: (1) supporting marginalized students or groups ($n=14$), (2) increasing the quality of educator professional development ($n=9$), and (3) supporting novices' entry into the profession ($n=3$). It is important to note that sometimes an individual dissertation could fit into more than one category. For example, one student looked into how to support marginalized students through professional development of teachers (Latzke, 2015). We discussed these overlapping dissertations as a research team, and made our decision about which category to place them in by returning to the complete dissertation and reviewing the background information leading to the study, purpose statement, and research question(s) that drove the study, ultimately placing the dissertation in the category that was most closely related to the purpose statement and research question(s). In addition, two of the 28 dissertations reviewed did not fit into any of the three categories and were therefore categorized as "other."

Half of the dissertations we examined ($n=14$) focused on PoPs centered on supporting marginalized students or groups. According to UNESCO—International Institute for Educational Planning (Lugaz et al., 2009), marginalized groups in education could be gender-related, culture-related, location-related, poverty-related, or special groups. Here we define "marginalized students or groups" as any of the above-mentioned categories, including but not limited to students of color, students of a low socioeconomic status, and students with special needs. Specifically, the marginalized student(s) our EdD students focused their dissertation work on included: African-American male students (Hunter, 2016; Thomas, 2014; Walsh, 2014), academically struggling African-American female students (Harris, 2015), English Language Learners (Christensen, 2014), disengaged Haitian American students (Fishbein, 2016), struggling and advanced learners in a detracked high-school biology and geometry classroom (MacDonald, 2016; Weller, 2016), students in early childhood education (Altman, 2016; Conage, 2014), a female student who was visually impaired and completely blind since birth (Mundorf, 2014), a gifted student receiving push-in enrichment support services in a mixed-ability classroom (Van Boven, 2015), LGBTQ students (Robertson, 2014), and students at hard to staff schools (Martin, 2016). PoPs in this category demonstrated our students' passion for making a difference in the lives of marginalized students and demonstrated the ways our program was consonant with the CPED principle recommending that EdD programs are "framed around questions of equity, ethics, and social justice to bring about solutions to complex PoPs" (CPED, 2014, Working Principles section, para. 5).

Nine of the dissertations we examined focused on increasing the quality of educator professional development. Situated in

practitioners' local contexts, these problems included meeting the need for effective professional learning opportunities for teachers when a school implemented new standards (Mallory, 2014; Moss, 2015), providing high quality professional development for early childhood educators (Pizano, 2016) and online teachers (Wiggins, 2016), introducing a particular framework (Ammons, 2015) or specific reflective tool (Saccasyn, 2015) to teachers, and helping teachers examine deficit views they may hold about particular groups of learners (Latzke, 2015). In addition, while a couple of our EdD students did not study teachers' engagement in professional development directly, their end goal was to help teachers grow. These two PoPs were about understanding the impact of a coaching model on teacher practice (Burns, 2015) and supporting principals to become strong leaders of job-embedded learning and coaching in their schools (Gibbs, 2015).

The third category of the nature of a PoP was supporting novices' entry into the profession. In our analysis, three studies fell into this category, with two focused on supporting new teachers and one focused on supporting new principals. An instructional staff developer attempted to better understand how she could provide new teachers the support they need to become more effective working with students of color and from poverty (Miccichi, 2014); A middle school intervention support specialist explored what the current support system for new teachers in her context looked like and designed and implemented ways to enhance it (Knutowski, 2014); and a school district administrator examined the perceptions of novice principals about the challenges they have faced and support received from the district in leading their high-poverty, low-performing schools (Kirton, 2014).

Research Question #3: What Are the Reported Impacts the Study of Problems of Practice (PoPs) Have on Doctoral Students' Local Contexts?

Across the 28 dissertations analyzed, five generic themes of impact emerged: (1) advancing/changing researchers' practice and beliefs, (2) promoting communication and collaboration, (3) strengthening/informing policy, (4) supporting student learning, and (5) fostering colleagues' learning (including challenging colleagues to rethink their practice). As we engaged in the process of data analysis as described in the methodology section to derive these themes however, it became apparent that it would be much more challenging to code and discuss findings related to our third and final research question than it was to code and discuss findings for research questions one and two. We found the task of naming categories for types of impact and then neatly sorting each dissertation into a category problematic for three reasons. First, each individual dissertation study had impact in numerous ways, leading every individual study to occupy multiple categories simultaneously. Second, the ways students described impact was usually very specific to their unique dissertation study and context. Without background details, as to the study itself and the rich, thick



description of the student's local context provided in the individual dissertation, generic descriptions of impact as portrayed in the dissertation would hold little meaning for readers of this paper. Hence, we learned as researchers that decontextualizing impact when it is specifically meant to be contextualized makes little sense. Finally, there was a great deal of variety across dissertations in the ways students discussed impact. For example, some students discussed impact throughout the dissertation, some in relationship to individual findings and some in the dissertation's final chapter. The variety in the ways students reported impact led the researchers to different interpretations of what the students' written words meant for their practice. Hence, we learned our understandings of impact and what it meant to the student's practice would be severely limited by relying solely on the dissertation report. Consequently, we are now embarking on a new study employing survey and interview data collection strategies to ascertain what practitioner scholarship looks like in practice after our students graduate from the EdD program and the program's influence on shaping students' practitioner scholarship. With the additional data sources of survey and interview, we believe we will develop a more accurate understanding of the impact of dissertation studies than we can through simply reading the dissertations alone, and will describe the impact categories derived from this study in further detail after the completion of study number two.

CONCLUSION

As a result of our analysis, we offer four principles for deriving PoPs to assist doctoral students across the nation in framing EdD dissertation studies. These principles include:

1. PoPs are deeply embedded in the students' professional practice or context.
2. PoPs emanate from felt difficulties and real-world dilemmas students face as they work as educational practitioners.
3. PoPs align with contemporary, critical issues in education explicated in the literature, such as creating more equitable schooling experiences for all children.
4. PoPs hold personal significance for the student's developing professional identity as a practitioner scholar.

As we found in our analysis of data related to our three research questions, EdD students in our program focused their research on highly contextualized problems of practice that were sometimes addressed with direct action, and sometimes more of an exploration of tensions around abiding dilemmas. The problems, for our students, were very real and very timely, and inextricably linked to their own identities and roles as professionals. These findings are reflected in the four principles outlined above.

We are continuing to develop these four guidelines for use within our program to help scaffold the dissertation work of EdD students. By providing principles that guide the naming, framing, and studying of the PoP for the EdD dissertation, we work to release EdD programs from the "PhD straightjacket" (Andrews & Grogan, 2005, p. 10) that too often defines them.

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