



Dossier Style Dissertations: Fostering Scholar-Practitioner Identity through Rapid Education Innovations

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ABSTRACT

Practitioner-oriented dissertations are unique in their potential to address wicked problems through relevant and timely applications of empirical research that can facilitate rapid change. This account describes the dossier style dissertation, a newly re-imagined dissertation of Johns Hopkins University's Doctor of Education program, with two options—an empirical deep dive and an applied project. Three graduates of the program illustrate their journeys with the dossier style dissertation—applied project, describe their work with research-practice partners and professional organizations, and highlight their growth as scholar-practitioners. Implications for practice and the merits of EdD program doctoral research options are discussed.

KEYWORDS

EdD dissertation, scholar-practitioner identity, dossier style dissertation

TRANSITION FROM THE APPLIED DISSERTATION TO THE DOSSIER STYLE DISSERTATION

Practitioner-oriented dissertations are unique in their potential to address wicked problems through relevant and timely applications of empirical research that can facilitate rapid change. At its inception, the Applied Dissertation of the Doctor of Education program at Johns Hopkins University was grounded in improvement science and incorporated two distinct but related empirical studies: a needs assessment followed by an applied intervention study and evaluation (Pape et al., 2022; Pape et al., 2023). The goal of this approach was for students to 1) explore problems deeply by understanding contributing factors of a Problem of Practice (PoP), determined from literature and an empirical investigation (needs assessment), and 2) develop, implement, and evaluate a targeted intervention, informed by findings from the needs assessment and intervention literature. This process aimed to develop scholar-practitioners who were efficacious in addressing educational problems, avoiding a “solutionitis” (Bryk et al., 2015) mindset or approach and aligned with the principles of improvement science to foster informed and rapid change for context-specific educational problems (Bryk et al., 2015).

The decision to re-imagine the program occurred about 10 years after the development of the online EdD in 2013. While a culture of continuous improvement existed, the faculty, with nudging from administration, developed a dissertation to allow for more options with only one empirical study in the dissertation. Currently,

students complete a Dossier Style Dissertation (DSD). The DSD includes one empirical needs assessment study, but with two options: 1) an Empirical Deep Dive (ED) or 2) an Applied Project (AP) (Shaw, et al., 2024). Both options require students to conduct an empirical study, the latter with an option to engage in applied work for immediate application or for future implementation. For the scope of this article, we are highlighting the students' DSD with APs, where students have engaged in a second literature review and created usable products for their professional fields as their final project.

Applied Dissertation vs. Dossier Style Dissertation

Before sharing our doctoral graduates' experiences with their DSD experiences, we provide a comparison of our original Applied Dissertation to the DSD and their unique features so that other EdD programs might see how our program is evolving and piloting different models of support. In the original five-chapter Applied Dissertation, doctoral students completed a literature review of factors related to the PoP using a systems lens, (Chapter 1). Next, a needs assessment study was undertaken to explore the degree to which certain driving factors of a PoP might be present in the doctoral student's professional context (Chapter 2). Based on the needs assessment study's findings, the doctoral student designed an intervention to address salient factors of the PoP as the dissertation's second part. To do this, they explored intervention literature related to salient factors from their needs assessment (Chapter 3). This intervention study allowed students to explore and evaluate a pilot



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This journal is published by Pitt Open Library Publishing.



impactinged.pitt.edu
Vol.10 No.3 (2025)

This journal is supported by the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate: A Knowledge Forum on the EdD (CPED) cpedinitiative.org

ISSN 2472-5889 (online)
DOI 10.5195/ie.2025.508

intervention within their own context (Chapter 4), calibrated for their professional community and stakeholders. The findings from the evaluation of their intervention and a discussion were detailed in Chapter 5 of the applied dissertation.

In the DSD, the doctoral student has two options. The first option, the AP, mirrors the traditional applied dissertation, but with only one empirical investigation. It includes a needs assessment study and an AP. In the needs assessment, the student investigates the extent to which the driving factors of the PoP exist in the professional context. Then, the student proposes and then prepares an intervention or some AP that should address one or more of the factors of the problem. However, the AP's outcomes are not included in the dissertation's purview. The second option, the ED, is an extended needs assessment. In the deeper dive needs assessment, the student follows a more traditional path in preparing their dissertation. It is a deep exploration of the factors of the PoP within the students' professional context. While the options vary for students completing the DSD, their coursework is the same, including three research methods courses, four core content courses, and four courses related to their area of interest (i.e., major).

In addition to content-related differences between the Applied Dissertation and the DSD, there are also differences in programmatic support such as the role of the advisor for the Applied Dissertation and doctoral mentor for the DSD, make-up of the dissertation committee, training in research methods, and use of coursework to complete the dissertation components. We delineate these components in Table 1 under the unique features of each section.

Dossier Style Dissertation Options: Applied Project and Empirical Deep Dive

The format of the DSD is similar for the ED and AP. They both include three projects across three years (Table 2). The projects are connected and cannot stand alone, like chapters of a traditional dissertation. Project 1 (year 1) is the **literature review on the PoP** and contributing factors to the problem, in alignment with Principle 1 of improvement science, which supports a problem-oriented approach to context-specific research, where the problem is identified. In Project 1, students use a systems lens to discuss various factors, as described by Principle 3 of improvement science, identifying the need to understand the system within which the problem resides (Bryk et al., 2015). Project 1 ends with a conceptual framework detailing the factors to be explored in the needs assessment.

Project 2 (year 2) is the **needs assessment study** and the research methods for this project. Project 2 varies depending on the option students choose. Here, Principle 2 from improvement science is realized as students aim to understand the variation in outcomes related to factors contributing to the problem. The needs assessment is an initial step to planning in the plan-do-study-act cycle (Bryk et al., 2015) as detailed in Principle 5 of improvement science. To test and learn, (Perla, Privost, and Parry, 2013), students must have a strong empirical approach to effectively measure and/or observe factors within their context as one cannot determine how and what to change without a clear understanding of the problem and why it persists. As such, and in alignment with Principle 4 of improvement science, students must determine the appropriate 1) quantitative measures and/or qualitative data

Table 1. Characteristics of the Applied and Dossier Style Dissertations

Applied Dissertation	Dossier Style Dissertation
Advisor One-on-one advisor sessions began at the end of the fall semester of first year. Each advisor supported 6-8 students over the course of the students' doctoral program.	Doctoral Mentor Doctoral Dossier Research (DDR) Mentor - like advising, one faculty member meets with 8-12 students in a course-based setting to support the development of the needs assessment, project proposal, and final dissertation defense in 3 semesters, one semester in each year of the program.
Unique features <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support was provided at the problem development stage during the first semester. Wrap-around year-long student support. Meetings adapted to student and faculty schedules. Students engaged in varied advising-dissertation development processes. 	Unique features <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Course-based setting allows for students to learn from the faculty mentor and from other students' processes. Students are guided in groups and one-on-one sessions with the faculty mentor.
Faculty Dissertation Committee Consists of three faculty members. One could be an external member in professional practice who holds an EdD or PhD.	Faculty Doctoral Dossier Research Committee Consists of two faculty members and an EdD graduate, or one faculty member and two EdD graduates.
Research Methods Training and experience are needed to evaluate research studies and conduct two empirical studies: the needs assessment and program evaluation for the intervention. This fosters research methods self-efficacy (Bryant et al., 2023), and scholar-practitioner identity (JohnBull et al., 2023).	Research Methods Training and experience are needed to evaluate research, conduct the needs assessment, and potentially develop an evaluation plan for the applied project. This fosters research methods self-efficacy for needs assessments (Bryant et al., 2023), and scholar-practitioner identity (JohnBull et al., 2023).
Integration of Dissertation Chapters within Courses: Course assignments were designed for students to complete partial drafts of the dissertation chapters in core courses.	Integration of DSD Projects within Courses: Course assignments are designed for students to focus primarily on course content with less application to the DSD drafts or projects.

collection approaches that align with constructs within the literature review and 2) analyses to address their research questions (Perry, Zambo, & Crow, 2020).

Students are trained in mixed-methods research and are encouraged to use a mixed methods or multi-methods research design. These research designs are encouraged because doctoral students tend to have small participant populations in their professional contexts, and the qualitative data typically enrich the quantitative findings and vice versa. As such, most students tend to ask questions that require the mixed methods research paradigm relying on descriptive and inferential statistics (e.g., t-test and correlation) as well as data collected from observation, field notes, interviews, and focus groups, to address their questions and satisfy the research objective (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Project 2 (year 2) for students completing the AP includes the results of the needs assessment (students would have submitted IRB materials, received approval and conducted the needs assessment during their second year in the program) in addition to a detailed description of the research methods described earlier.

Project 3 (year 3) includes a description of and presentation of the **fully developed AP**, discussion and limitations, implications for practice, and personal reflection. The AP determined through a



literature review of interventions related to addressing the driving factors of the problem. After students have completed the needs assessment, they explore solutions through the literature, and determine an appropriate project based upon the interventions or solutions from the literature that have had positive effects on the driving factors of the problem. Students who complete the AP defend Projects 1, 2, and the proposed AP within Project 3 for their proposal defense at the beginning of year 3. Once approved, they complete their AP by the end of year 3. The three-year timeline varies slightly for students completing the ED. It is defended at the end of Year 2 and carried out during students' 3rd year in the program.

Table 2. Applied Project and Empirical Deep Dive Timeline At-a-Glance

	Applied Project	Empirical Deep Dive
Year 1	Project 1: Literature Review of the PoP and Contributing Factors using a Systems Lens	
Year 2	Project 2: Research Methods for the Needs Assessment and Findings	Project 2: Research Methods for the Empirical Deep Dive (i.e. Needs Assessment)
End of Year 2	Refine Projects 1, 2 and Develop Proposal for Applied Project	Dossier Style Dissertation Proposal Defense of Projects 1 and 2
Year 3	Dossier Style Dissertation Proposal Defense of Projects 1, 2, and the Applied Project	Conduct the Empirical Deep Dive and Findings
End of Year 3	Project 3: Dossier Style Dissertation Defense	

Note: While the project descriptions are disseminated by program administrators, variation exists based on how advisors and students choose to execute the three projects. For example, some may choose to spread the projects across four chapters instead of within three projects.

We believe that the DSD opens opportunities for students to deeply explore their PoP and develop APs that 1) potentially expands students' spheres of influence given the variety of modalities of the AP (Storey & Maughan, 2015), 2) allows opportunities to engage in networked communities through research-practice partnerships (Bryk et al., 2015), described in Principle 6 of improvement science, 3) supports their scholar-practitioner identity development through transformative learning experiences (JohnBull et al., 2023; Mezirow, 1997), and 4) buttresses their self-efficacy through the formation of beautiful questions arising from the entire context-specific research process (Bryant et al., 2023; JohnBull et al., 2023). This article explores these assertions through the works of three graduates of the Johns Hopkins University EdD program who completed the DSD with the AP.

Examples from Graduates: Scholar-Practitioner Journeys

In the DSD process, graduate students work with their colleagues from their contexts (i.e., research-practice partners), their doctoral advisor or doctoral mentor, and dissertation committee members to calibrate their projects for immediate implementation. In the following sections, three co-authors for this article share their experiences with the first option DSD - AP. When the students entered the program, the DSD was not an option. As such, each expected to implement and evaluate an intervention. However, when the program changed, their cohort was given the option to complete

the Applied Dissertation or one of the two options of the DSD. Each author completed a needs assessment in their professional context. Then, they created an AP to address one or more contributing factors of the problem determined from the literature review and needs assessment findings. The authors discuss their PoP and influencing variables, how the needs assessment and literature informed their AP, and the role of networked communities in the development of their project. Then, each graduate discusses what they learned about themselves in terms of their scholar-practitioner identity and self-efficacy.

Dr. Emily Robbiboaro's Journey

About five years ago, in the affluent, high achieving high school where I work as an English teacher, state-level exam scores began diverging, with English Language Arts increasing and other disciplinary areas decreasing. Interested in exploring the literacy components of this phenomenon, I used Bronfenbrenner's (1997) ecological systems theory as a framework to explore systemic and individual factors that contribute to literacy challenges across content areas. My initial literature synthesis revealed high socioeconomic status educational environments have unique presentations of difficulties in instruction of disciplinary literacy related to teacher pressures, parental tensions, extrinsic motivation of students, and high expectations of standardized test performance (Becker et al., 2010; Ciciolla et al., 2017; Luthar & Kumar, 2018; Williamson et al., 2014).

With an eye toward determining the most effective intervention, I conducted a mixed methods needs assessment using a sequential explanatory design, examining the following research questions: What are high school teachers' similarities and differences in beliefs and attitudes regarding implementing disciplinary literacy practices in English, Social Studies, Mathematics, and Science? What is the extent of teachers' literacy instruction? What types of literacy training have teachers received? What types of critical and disciplinary literacy practices do teachers implement within their classrooms?

The mixed methods research design provided me with the opportunity to examine the many facets of cross-disciplinary literacy challenges comprehensively (Robbiboaro, 2023). First, quantitative measures explored teacher beliefs and attitudes related to incorporating literacy into their classes. Comparing these perceptions across content areas, I found that teachers across all disciplines equally seek to challenge students with texts but overall have low levels of self-efficacy in implementing strategies. Additionally, significant differences in attitude between the mathematics and English departments revealed conflicting perspectives on the importance of incorporating literacy into the classroom. Qualitative data in the form of interviews and focus groups reinforced low self-efficacy in teacher literacy implementation, primarily due to lack of training, time, and administrative support. Interestingly, document collection, including lesson plans, assignments, and activities from twelve courses across four content areas revealed that teachers tend to engage in more literacy instruction than they reported on quantitative measures or shared in focus groups. However, classroom artifacts highlighted more acutely the difference between actively instructing in literacy strategies (e.g. instructing students in strategies to examine primary source documents or modeling annotation approaches) versus passively presenting them (e.g. asking students to read primary source document or assigning students to annotate a textbook).

Applied Project and Research Practice Partners

Drawing on my background as a practitioner and my newly developing research skills, I developed a rubric-style method of evaluating possible interventions. First, I took the key challenges identified in the needs assessment, *lasting change*, *curriculum support*, *time sensitivity*, *knowledge*, *self-efficacy*, and *expert guidance* and examined pre-existing research that implemented successful interventions for each challenge. Additionally, I considered the role of *critical reflection*, identified by Mezirow (1997) as a necessary component to changing a frame of reference and, ultimately, transformative learning. I assigned a rating from zero to two in each category across all interventions to more comprehensively determine their ability to address each characteristic listed. A rating of zero indicated that either the intervention did not address the challenge or described results that did not change the initial frame of reference for that challenge. A rating of one indicated that the intervention resulted in only a possible or mixed change in frame of reference. Finally, a rating of two meant that the intervention clearly articulated a positive change in frame of reference. The sum of scores in each category were then compared for each intervention.

This evaluation determined that a literacy coaching program as the intervention would have the greatest impact in this environment in improving teacher beliefs, attitudes, and self-efficacy in literacy instruction. Using Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theory as a framework, I developed a comprehensive literacy coaching program to be piloted in the mathematics department. The guidebook included step-by-step program implementation guidance, a clear layout of the coaching role, and advice on managing challenges, and all materials and tools needed for successful use. I also ensured that the program included comprehensive process and outcome evaluations.

To carry out the AP, I relied on collaboration with varied parties across my context. The nature of researching literacy instruction across disciplines in a high school setting meant that I invited every full and part-time educator in my building to participate. As I narrowed my focus, teachers of English, mathematics, social studies, and science engaged more deeply in the qualitative piece of my research. What I did not expect, however, were the enduring conversations and opportunities for collaboration that the initial discussions led to. Many teachers across the building now have an interest in the ways in which they can engage students in disciplinary literacy practices, even before engaging in a coaching program. I also collaborated closely with building administration to ensure that the research I conducted not only aligned with the mission, vision, and values of the district, but enhanced them. At each step of my needs assessment process, I met with the building principal to examine results and discuss next steps. This open dialogue further enhanced my application of Bronfenbrenner's (1994) framework as I could more clearly envision the ways in which this work embedded in larger district systems rather than simply through my own frame of reference.

Lessons Learned and Practical Application

I am confident that I was able to create a guidebook that was much more comprehensive and thorough than would have been possible to complete in a typical doctoral program dissertation. It allowed me to develop a real, applicable solution to a complex problem with many competing causes. Rather than developing a small-scale intervention that may have remediated one small element of literacy instruction in a content area classroom, I

developed a product based on thorough research that lends itself not only to solving a problem but also laying a more complete foundation for new research opportunities. This literacy coaching guidebook is fully prepared for implementation and can provide immediate, positive educational impacts. Further, it requires the collection of all data necessary for evaluation and study of effectiveness. Ultimately, the guidebook for literacy coaching provides real, concrete value for both practitioners and researchers.

Changes in Scholar-Practitioner Identity

I began my career in 2006, earned teaching certifications as a secondary English instructor and K-12 reading specialist, and led literacy training for colleagues. I have been a student and a practitioner for many years. However, those experiences were disparate. As a new researcher, I am now a student of practice. I consider problems differently. I look systemically and see that solutions to difficult problems are possible. More importantly, developing a comprehensive literacy coaching guidebook gave me the opportunity not only to solve a difficult problem, but also to build evaluation and improvement opportunities within that solution. Additionally, because users of the guidebook may not have a research background, I learned how to translate research-based programming into practitioner-friendly language, an invaluable skill for an educator looking to continue to make positive, effective systemic change. Like the guidebook, this process was iterative, and I now see so clearly that answers to problems need not be static; they grow and transform across time and context.

Dr. Maria Vasquez's Journey

As an art historian, educator, and curator who designs educational projects for art exhibitions in Guatemala City, my doctoral journey led me to the creation of a guide for museum professionals titled *Rethinking Practice: A Guide to Designing Visitor-Centered Art Exhibitions* (Vasquez, 2023). The guide is the applied product of a DSD that examines art exhibitions as informal learning environments and the wide-ranging possibilities for visitor engagement with the arts. The context of the study is the Arts Education and Culture Department of the Municipality of Guatemala City, a branch of local government that aims to offer community members meaningful ways of engaging with the arts.

The rationale behind this dissertation is that for the past five decades, museums have focused on the collection, conservation, and interpretation of objects (Burlon Soares, 2020). It is only over the past decade that the social role of museums has been emphasized along with the idea that museums can be spaces for inclusion and social justice (Burlon Soares, 2020; ICOM, 2023) that need to address topics such as accessibility, inclusion, community participation, learning and reflection (ICOM, 2023). These changes in perspective about the role and purpose of a museum are a call to action for museum professionals to rethink current practices and examine how their work can best serve their communities and promote inclusion for all visitors.

During my doctoral journey, I noticed that our work at the Arts Education and Culture Department of the Municipality of Guatemala reflected the traditional practices described in the literature (Burlon Soares, 2020). One example is that the curatorial practices we had in place, such as the use of specialized language in the museum texts and labels, may have unintentionally excluded visitors unfamiliar with the art world (Bennet, 2019; Blunden, 2020; Coffee, 2008; Lachapelle, 2007). This is one of the systemic barriers that we

needed to be aware of that prevented some visitors from having a meaningful experience at our art exhibitions. It is our job, however, to be aware and become more intentional about how our work impacts the community we serve.

To understand and address the problem, this DSD included one empirical study or needs assessment, two literature reviews, and an AP distributed across four chapters. The first literature review examined the different systems related to visitors' experience at an art exhibition through Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological systems theory. It focused on understanding the factors related to the experience of visitors at an art exhibition with an emphasis on how traditional curatorial practice through the use of language in museum texts can be a form of social and cultural exclusion (Jensen, 2013), favoring highly educated and affluent visitors (Bourdieu et al., 1991; Falk & Katz-Gerro, 2016; Jung, 2014; Suarez-Fernandez et al., 2020) while excluding those unfamiliar with the art world (Bennet, 2019; Blunden, 2020; Coffee, 2008; Lachapelle, 2007).

To further understand the experience of visitors at an art exhibition, I conducted a multi-methods study with a sample of 19 participants. The study examined the multidimensional construct of visitor experience (Packer & Ballantyne, 2016; Packer et al., 2018) and visitor perception of museum texts and labels. Traditionally, the purpose of museum texts and labels is to transmit knowledge about a work of art (Mayer, 2005), with the implication that there is one way of looking at art that requires the visitor to interpret and evaluate the work through the lens of art history (Rice, 1988). Examining these constructs allowed me to reflect on how biases and assumptions from my discipline shaped my practice and try to understand the experience of visitors from their perspectives. As art historians and curators, it is not uncommon for the historical canon to inform the selection of works of art at an art exhibition, and therefore, what we consider important for visitors to see (Prottas, 2017). In this study, understanding visitors' experiences was crucial to understanding and rethinking our professional practice.

The study revealed that visitors tended to perceive their experience as connected to reflection and introspection and that they read the labels of the objects they were interested in. Through an understanding of the experience of visitors, art exhibition designers have ample opportunities to implement strategies in the exhibition space that promote reflective engagement and metacognition (Flavell, 1979; Ghee, 2008) and help visitors become more aware of their thinking when contemplating art. To address the need for the exhibition space to offer visitors meaningful opportunities for engaging with the art on display, a further exploration of the literature through the framework of Gee's (2008) sociocultural theory and opportunity to learn, shed light on specific strategies for art exhibition designers to target specific outcomes for visitors (Ritchhart, 2007; Szubielska et al., 2021; Tishman, 2017) highlighting the need for museum professionals to rethink their professional practice.

Applied Project and Research-Practice Partners

The product of the dissertation was a guide for practice that aimed to support exhibition designers in the museum setting by offering a framework to reconsider their roles through critical reflection, research-informed practice, and collaborative inquiry. The name of the guide is *Rethinking Practice: A Guide to Designing Visitor-Centered Art Exhibitions*. The rationale behind this work was to create a tool that focuses on a specific context and work with contextualized knowledge (Ravitch, 2014) that contributes to considering the visitor as central to designing art exhibitions. To

create a product that was deeply embedded in its context, I presented the guide to the art exhibition team at the Arts Education and Culture Department of the Municipality of Guatemala to discuss the framework and listen to their experiences and feedback. The process consisted of one meeting with the team of curators and exhibition designers who organize and design art exhibitions at the Arts Education and Culture Department of the Municipality of Guatemala. The conversation shed light on the importance of critical reflection and the idea of constantly reflecting on our practice in a structured way to examine our assumptions and consider multiple perspectives. Through this conversation, I decided that the implementation of the guide would be through collaborative in-person sessions, which would allow me to understand the perceptions of the different members of the art exhibition design team and listen to all voices.

Lessons Learned and Practical Application

As an art historian, curator, and member of the team that designs educational programs for art exhibitions in my context, developing this guide offered an unparalleled opportunity to reconsider and reframe my practice as well as share with my colleagues a way to understand the work we do through the lens of research. Specifically, this work helped me understand the centrality of the visitors when designing art exhibitions, and to consider their experiences in every step of the process. The idea behind the art exhibition design framework is to be interdependent and iterative through ongoing cycles of critical reflection, research-informed practice, and collaborative inquiry. Due to its iterative nature, it assumes that the outcomes of this process will be constantly changing as we become more aware of our assumptions, engage in a practice that draws on research to inform the work we do and engage in collaborative inquiry.

Changes in Scholar-Practitioner Identity

This journey has been transformational in that I now approach my work through the lens of scholarly practice, acknowledging its complexity and engaging in ongoing cycles of reflection and self-reflection. This new way of seeing and interacting with what I do has inevitably changed who I am by allowing me to be more aware of my biases and assumptions and how they may impact my work. I believe this ongoing process allows my work to be more scholarly, reflective, and robust.

Dr. Jeremy Williams' Journey

As a social justice warrior committed to creating a united community of change agents that dismantle systems of injustice, I embarked on my journey toward academic enhancement in 2018 and completed that journey in 2022, focusing on Mind, Brain, and Teaching. Through the theoretical lens of critical race theory, my DSD, titled *Postsecondary Persistence, Pedagogy, and Professional Development: A Change-Making Mentality Via Teacher Confidence To Teach 21st Century Skills*, explored financial, social-emotional, and academic factors contributing to the low postsecondary persistence rate among students of color. The research addressed how many Black and Latine students fall short of earning degrees, often accumulating debt that exacerbates income inequality and perpetuates racial inequity. It highlights the necessity of 21st-century skills—such as innovation, critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and collaboration—that these students are not consistently accessing and acquiring. These skills are crucial for both postsecondary success and the workforce (Klinberg, 2018).

Unfortunately, state policies like standardized testing (Au, 2007; Trilling & Fadel, 2009), inequitable resource distribution (Strayhorn, 2007), and outdated teacher professional development practices (Darling et al., 2017) create a cycle of systemic oppression, undermining teacher confidence and promoting inequity.

Applied Project and Research-Practice Partners

This AP included a [pedagogical framework grounded in project-based learning](#) and a [scope and sequence of professional development](#). These products were meticulously crafted in response to the needs assessment conducted during the research phase. The framework was adopted from RevX, an organization dedicated to innovative educational practices. In the RevX model, all learning is centered on a relevant cause that children care deeply about. In addition to being a researcher and doctoral student, I worked as a school design partner with RevX, supporting schools in implementing the RevX model through a refinement of the framework, adult professional development, curriculum development, and project management. This dual role enriched my understanding of the practical challenges and opportunities in implementing innovative educational practices. Working closely with research-practice partners was a pivotal aspect of this journey. The relationship with these partners, including the RevX co-founders, school design partners, school districts, and individual educators, was characterized by regular communication, mutual respect, and a shared commitment to improving educational outcomes. These partnerships were instrumental in designing and implementing the professional development intervention. Regular meetings and feedback sessions provided valuable insights that kept the research grounded in practical realities, ensuring that the intervention was both impactful and feasible.

Lessons Learned and Practical Application

From this collaborative process, several lessons emerged. First, effective communication was crucial, especially during the needs assessment with educators and students. Educators and newly graduated alumni often lack the capacity to do much outside of their immense responsibilities to their studies, students, administrators, and personal lives. Therefore, it was essential to be clear about the research's purpose, what it would require from their time, and to schedule necessary follow-ups, reminders, and troubleshooting sessions. Regular, transparent interactions with partners ensured alignment and addressed challenges promptly. This open line of communication allowed for the swift resolution of misunderstandings and facilitated a smoother implementation of the project. It also helped build trust and mutual respect among all parties involved, which is essential for any successful partnership.

Next, flexibility was both important for the acquired school partners that committed to implementing the RevX model with its project-based learning framework and for me as a scholar-practitioner. Being open to feedback and willing to adapt based on practical insights from educators enhanced the project's relevance and effectiveness. Through regular feedback loops with school partners, we co-created the pedagogical approach to teacher professional development, the scope and sequence of professional development, and the methods for evaluating its effectiveness. This iterative process ensured that the project remained aligned with the needs and realities of the educators and students it aimed to serve. This adaptability also fostered a sense of ownership among the partners, as they saw their input directly influencing the project's direction and outcomes. The collaborative nature of these feedback

loops not only enriched the project but also strengthened the partnership, leading to a more robust and impactful implementation.

In my original approach to the research, I planned to create a professional learning experience for teachers to enhance their self-efficacy, implement that experience, collect data, and report the findings. However, the timeline of the school partnership and my academic calendar/dissertation timeline did not align in a way that would be financially feasible (as I would need to continue my enrollment as a full-time student beyond four years) or conducive to my own mental health and capacity as a husband and father. I am immensely grateful to my advisor and co-author, Dr. JohnBull, for presenting the DSD option, which allowed me to create the professional learning experience, plan its implementation, and develop a strategy to evaluate its effectiveness once time permitted for implementation.

Changes in Scholar-Practitioner Identity

Reflecting on the components of my doctoral journey, several aspects were particularly influential in shaping my identity. The dissertation experience profoundly influenced my identity development and self-efficacy as a scholar-practitioner. It solidified my confidence and conviction to collaborate with Johns Hopkins and other higher education institutions to enhance the experience of future scholar-practitioners. Conducting a thorough needs assessment was crucial; it highlighted the real-world challenges and needs in education, allowed me to connect personally with students and teachers, and guided my research focus and approach. The continuous feedback from advisors and partners, coupled with the process of reflecting on my work, deepened my understanding of my role and impact as a scholar-practitioner.

The interactions with my professional partners were profoundly influential to my identity development. The school partners at the time of my research were educators who served in environments like the one I grew up in as a K-12 student and worked in as an educator. The schools I collaborated with were in the heart of historically and systematically marginalized communities in the Bronx, New York, Houston, Texas, and McComb, Mississippi. These communities were comprised of hardworking, caring, and inspiring families who desired a learning experience that would equip their children to be changemakers in their own realities. The co-founders of RevX are three incredibly well-rounded, dynamic, and brilliant Black women who dared to act on a freedom dream to create a world where children claim their power, evolve themselves, and transform the world around them. Their investment in my potential and deep love and accountability for my identity as a Black man in America were magnificently manifested and nobly nurtured throughout our partnership. Their graciousness, humility, and altruism in allowing me to utilize their intellectual property, adopt their framework, and work collaboratively to adapt and adjust the model to enhance the research was truly remarkable. Working closely with educators who were dedicated to their communities and witnessing the direct impact of our collaborative efforts reinforced the importance of culturally responsive and community-centered educational practices. This experience deepened my understanding of the systemic challenges faced by marginalized communities and strengthened my resolve to contribute to meaningful and sustainable change through education.



LESSONS LEARNED AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The doctoral journey that our graduates have traversed is one of transformational change, for all of us involved in the process. Those of us who served as the advisors and doctoral committee members undoubtedly were made better by the doctoral students' new ideas, new questions, thoughtful research, and embedded projects in the professional practice. In the following sections, we describe how the DSD with the AP provides a direct route to rapid innovations for professional practice through a thorough understanding of the problem. Further, we assert that the DSD, and any dissertation, should be the road to growing scholar-practitioners who are problem diagnosticians and solution calibrators.

Rapid Innovations Based on Needs Assessments

By allowing the doctoral students to focus on the needs assessment study as the main research component of the DSD and create an AP to address the needs, the doctoral students were empowered to take products into the profession for refinement with their research-practice partners in their workplaces. Dr. Vasquez did this by working with exhibition designers and curators, which resulted in a greater desire to include multiple voices for the implementation of the guide. In addition, as described by Dr. Robbbaro, the AP expanded students' opportunity to address the PoP beyond their immediate sphere of influence. This type of dissertation adaptation creates jumping off points for doctoral graduates in their professions, launching their new collaboration as newly commissioned scholar-practitioners. Graduating competent scholar-practitioners with both components in hand, a needs assessment and an informed project co-created with their colleagues, uses a similar approach to what community development professionals have been doing for years. For example, Peace Corps volunteers are first asked to get to know their communities and conduct needs assessments to inform their work with their communities, because community planning is optimized when the needs of the community are first understood (Arthur & Blitz, 2000; Teichert, 2009); and public health professionals traditionally conduct healthcare assessments to determine the needs of populations (Wright et al., 1998). Similarly, this DSD provides both experiences, a needs assessment and an AP to address the needs, which helps budding scholar-practitioners serve their professional organizations effectively.

Distinct Scholar-Practitioners

Our EdD doctoral graduates represent a unique type of practitioner, the scholar-practitioner; they not only have a new set of tools in their toolboxes, but they have a fresh coat of paint on their toolboxes, their new identities as scholar-practitioners. Not only have they developed meaningful projects ready for implementation in their practice, but they themselves are a new kind of professional for their organizations. They have partnered with their colleagues from their professions and taken them along their doctoral journey. This collaboration has the potential to expedite the understanding of problems of practice and their improvement (Bryk et al., 2015).

The AP of the DSD allows for students to create a project or program that addresses factors that influence the PoP, and it still allows for doctoral committee review, revisions, and suggestions. The implementation and evaluation happen in the professional context once the doctoral student has graduated, or sometimes while they are completing the program. Further, the iterative process of co-

creating and refining research-informed interventions with research-practice partners can accelerate the innovations through these rich relationships, which ultimately solidify the doctoral students' identity transformation into scholar-practitioners, as was shared by Dr. Williams in his research-practice partnership with the dynamic leaders of RevX.

While the DSD is the final requirement for the Doctor of Education degree, we would not classify this necessarily as an end-product. Similar to a traditional dissertation, the DSD research journey requires doctoral students to engage in an original empirical project that allows these burgeoning scholar-practitioners to become, what Dr. Robbbaro called a "student of practice" for life. The DSD and any dissertation are launching pads, catalysts for igniting practitioners' life-long journeys into scholarly practice within their fields to engender positive improvement for the betterment of the people in their spheres of influence.

Problem Diagnosticians and Solution Calibrators

Providing this dissertation example from the Johns Hopkins University SOE EdD program is one that we propose should be considered for other programs contemplating how to adapt doctoral products for their EdD programs. Needs assessment studies provide the essential framing of the PoP, through the literature, and examination of the factors of the problem through empirical exploration. Then, creating and co-creating the intervention or solution or tools for the professional practice in response to the needs assessment and informed by the literature allows the doctoral students to adapt their solutions iteratively in their professional contexts without the pressure of evaluating and implementing the products or programs with the constraints of the university institutional review and the limitations of small participant populations. In the cases of our three graduates and co-authors (Robbbaro, 2023; Vasquez, 2023; Williams, 2022), the products were genuinely collaboratively generated with their research-practice partners using their research lenses together, providing the graduates with solid steppingstones into the scholar-practitioner roles in their professions.

Leadership opportunities abound for EdD doctoral graduates once their dissertations and degrees are completed, both within their current organizations and beyond. What has been lovely about this DSD process is how the scholarly APs organically took on many different forms that allowed doctoral students to direct their learning, their passion, and the professional products that melded their intellectual and professional strengths in leading these professional initiatives. The three graduates from this program leveraged all their scholar-practitioner insights to produce meaningful and data-driven transformative products for their contexts. Moreover, they anchored their work in addressing the nuanced factors of the problem with their professional research-practice partners in response to their needs assessments. The DSD processes nurtured the growth of these scholar-practitioner leaders.

We offer these insights, comparisons, and lessons learned to document their growth and journeys as well as our own growth as doctoral advisors. Whether it is a DSD or any kind of dissertation, there is so much meaning and value in deeply understanding the contextualized problem and the systems that influence the factors of the problem. Without this clear understanding, we will always be spinning our wheels in education - throwing blunt solutions at problems. Our hope is that any EdD program would deeply engage their doctoral students in learning how to be problem diagnosticians.

These types of scholar-practitioners look at the system and the context-based factors of a PoP through the literature and through a needs assessment study to better understand the nuances of the problem and to determine which factors are most treatable. They calibrate solutions to address the factors of the problem. Doing education problem triage, in a sense, is what we hope our doctoral graduates can do, which means their paths forward are limitless. We hope that with these accounts and reflections, more programs will be encouraged to provide a menu of choices to doctoral students. Doing so will catalyze doctoral student professional growth as scholar-practitioners and thereby ignite momentum with their research-practice partners in their spheres of influence to make the world a better place, one organization at a time.

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