



Trust, Relationships, & Liberation: Key Ingredients for Joint Dissertations of Practice

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ABSTRACT

Joint dissertations are a deliberate approach to antiracist systems change: simultaneously morphing the process of doctoral completion and supporting scholar practitioners to shift systems through their actions. At the School of Education at American University, scholar practitioners and chairs are learning together how the joint dissertation of practice can be a tool for systemic change within PK-12 and within EdD programs. Within this essay, we share our experiences and reflections as graduates, chairs, and collaborators.

KEYWORDS

joint dissertation of practice, liberatory consciousness, antiracism

In October 2019, cohort one came to DC for our first residency in our inaugural program. On day three, we held a session on the dissertation of practice, where we shared that the EdD program vision centered re-imagining PK-12 and a need to simultaneously re-imagine higher education, including the dissertation of practice. We discussed how this could have various forms: a podcast, a video, a collaborative endeavor, or something we haven't created yet. And cohort one, as the inaugural cohort, the group that was open to so much ambiguity and change, asked lots of questions about aligning this dissertation of practice with antiracism. A few members of this cohort asked about writing collaborative dissertations of practice, and the energy about this possibility was palpable, especially from two cohort members.

Collaborative Dissertations of Practice

A collaborative dissertation of practice is exactly as it sounds, an opportunity for scholarly practitioners to co-construct praxis and create opportunities for multiple perspectives and collective action (CPED, n.d.; Hamilton, 2022; Kennedy et al, 2018; Wergin, 2011). Collaborative dissertations involve more than one scholar practitioner, and increasingly, these collective approaches are called joint dissertations where they involve two individuals and group-based dissertations where they include three or more contributors.

Across disciplines, including history and sociology, doctoral students are working together on projects to produce new doctoral outputs, beyond lengthy manuscripts, and they are seeking advisor and university support and approval to do so (Patton, 2013). Within the education context and the Carnegie Project on the Education

Doctorate (CPED) specifically, there are programs (Michigan State, Augusta University, Arizona State University, etc) that allow or recommend group dissertations in practice as part of their program of study, and there are other programs that encourage joint dissertations of practice.

We have only begun collaborative dissertations within our Doctor of Education (EdD) program at American University (AU) in Washington DC, and we are grateful that a few scholar practitioner pairs established this co-dissertation opportunity, paving a way for antiracist, collaborative scholarly practice. As two faculty chairs of dissertation of practice committees alongside four graduates who engaged and spearheaded our program's first two (and only) collaborative dissertations of practice, we want to share and reflect on our experience through our cases and our understanding of liberatory consciousness. Samantha Cohen, EdD faculty, chaired and learned alongside, Marisa Mendonsa and Brian Reilly in cohort 1, and William Thomas IV, EdD faculty, chaired and learned alongside Jennifer Beckwith and Ashley Royal, cohort 5 alumna.

A Very Brief Dissertation History

Dissertations are borne out of a history of academic pursuits from the Middle Ages and more recently situated in the German focus on scholarship, emphasizing theory development. The earliest Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) programs and dissertations in the 1800s in Germany, within the sciences, focused on rigor, pursuing knowledge, and original research. These Western European roots cemented a focus on individuality and originality by design, which has become tradition across doctoral fields (McGee & DeLong, 2007;



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Paltridge & Starfield, 2020; Perry, Zambo & Crow, 2020; Wergin, 2011). And while there are current shifts in Germany, across Europe, and in some fields in the United States, to consider other products, approaches, and practice-oriented purposes, the dissertation largely remains an individual pursuit to demonstrate uniqueness, rigor, and intelligence. The doctoral degree is awarded to individuals for their scholarship and work, without recognition of the collaboration and connection needed for the pursuit, beyond the scholarly reference list and citations.

The EdD degree, first granted at Harvard in 1920, was created as a practitioner doctorate, serving as a terminal degree for those in education practice, similar to the Doctor of Medicine (MD) and Juris Doctor (JD), for medical doctors and lawyers, who use existing knowledge to practice and work (Wergin, 2010). Wergin argues that the seminal work in the EdD should be continued scholarship on practice, “a demonstration of expertise that showcases the candidate’s mastery of inquiry into practice” (p. 130). Throughout the history of the EdD, tensions continue to surface about whether it is a lower tier PhD or something else entirely, and as a result, the culminating product remains in debate, in terms of substance, format, and authorship.

This complication is even more pronounced across EdD programs, where there are debates amongst the purpose, value, and pedagogy. Wergin (2011) contends that most EdD programs continue to require dissertations, which were intended for PhD candidates, “demonstrating their ability to preserve and enrich the knowledge base of the discipline by engaging in original research, [when they should instead] require a demonstration of expertise that showcases the candidate’s mastery of inquiry into practice” (p. 130). And while Wergin names that EdDs can be “emancipating tools for social change” (p. 121) in a myriad of ways, he focuses more on participatory action research, rather than joint research.

CPED has led convenings and collaboration on the purpose and existence of the EdD, including the contents and existence of the final product. CPED, through Jill Perry’s leadership, states that dissertations in practice ought to be different, from traditional dissertations, by being “co-constructed, user-centered, focus(ed) on diversity, equity, and social justice, and meaningful to the student and their professional context” (Perry et al. 2020, p. 37). This focus on justice and co-construction have been central within our program design, reflection, evolution, and pausing to consider how to further embody these.

American University’s EdD Program and Alignment with Joint Dissertations of Practice

American University’s doctoral program in education policy and leadership centers personal leadership, social justice and anti-racism, research and policy, and systems change. We aim to equip students with knowledge and skills that they can pragmatically explore within their current roles and within the practical projects and demands of the program, so that graduate leaders can create, disrupt, and evolve our PK-12 education system to meet the current needs of youth and adult learners. Our EdD program is a part-time, online program, where students from across the United States explore issues and opportunities in pre-kindergarten through 12th grade education. Our model centers on creating a diverse cohort of online learners who construct a learning community and learning organization with one another, as we test ideas, build knowledge, and explore the possibilities of what can be within education.

Joint dissertations of practice cohere with our core values, pedagogy, and programmatic priorities, namely the focus on conscious leadership, collaboration, systems thinking, and collective action. Joint dissertations are a step in the path toward antiracist praxis and an approach to fractal systems change, as “fundamental shift(s) require many small steps” (brown, 2017). Dei (2005) implores us to understand that “anti-racism research and praxis means challenging and rupturing the very structures one is trying to work with” (p.10). We believe that EdD programs have a responsibility to center antiracism in their pedagogy and ethos—“explicitly articulat(ing) their distinctive understanding of social justice and trac(ing) the ways that this understanding is operationalized” (Porfilio et al., 2019).

Joint dissertations are a deliberate approach to antiracist systems change: simultaneously morphing the process of doctoral completion and supporting scholar practitioners to shift systems through their action. “Complex, adaptive problems defy tidy logic models and reductive technical solutions” and they require deep relational work, healing, transforming power dynamics, and inner change (Milligan et al., 2022, para. 2). We believe that joint dissertations are one approach to Wergin (2011) and Perry et al.’s (2020) invitations and commitments to re-booting and re-imaging the EdD and moving toward communal, justice-oriented new horizons.

Antiracist scholarship and praxis are collective. They necessitate understanding the connected human experience and our complex intersectional identities. They require dialogic engagement with ideas and people. They require dismantling white supremacy’s individualism (Okun, 2021) and “cultivat(ing) the muscle of radical imagination....(and) collective ideation” (brown, 2017, p. 59). They hinge upon conscientization, teaming, and trust building (Dei, 2005: Freire, 1970). Additionally, within antiracist improvement science, we must ensure that improvement work centers justice. We define problems in and with community, we create theories of improvement that necessitate joint action, and we implement interventions with others (Hinnant-Crawford, 2023; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Perry et al., 2020). Within Marisa and Brian’s dissertation of practice, we wrote, “In education today, collaboration is essential and required... Rarely do leaders or teachers work in isolation. Therefore, being able to work together to co-construct this dissertation of practice felt familiar and less foreign to us.”

This ought to be an invitation to create collaborative dissertations of practice, and yet, far too many dissertations and dissertations of/in practice are sole endeavors of manuscript writing that sit on shelves, as has been part of the tradition that has been passed down of what it means to be a doctoral degree holder. Dissertations frequently adhere to academic writing, with its emphasis on publication, generalizable insights, and reaching scholarly readers. Dissertations of/in practice, on the other hand, are designed to address real world problems of practice, for those in academic and practitioner roles, who are seeking to implement change. However, dissertations and dissertations of/in practice often have a prescribed flow and format, and they are not read nor utilized regularly by practitioners. This combination of formulaic structure and publication for a limited audience lead many dissertations to become manuscripts with few readers or consumers. Additionally, the dissertation writing and publication processes tend to be individualized, lacking a team or collaborative approach to construction and dissemination.



Improvement Science as an Antiracist tool for change

When American University's doctoral program launched in 2019, a central purpose was to cultivate spaces within the PK-12 education system that meet the community's needs, which requires unlearning and re-imagining the ways we learn and conduct research. Our program aims to center antiracism in scholarship, policy, and practice which necessitates that our scholar practitioners prioritize co-constructing learning experiences among students, staff, and faculty through trust-building and risk-taking. The antiracist commitment is the cornerstone of why we believe unique, innovative, and impactful research studies, and their written products and presentations, are necessary and should be deemed necessary by the experts who work in the learning spaces that intend to be impacted. In addition to the program's antiracist values, we strive to use improvement science as a methodological backbone to facilitating actionable, practitioner research, which aims to improve educational practices through collaborative and participatory change ideas. This type of practitioner research is situational and context-based, which often requires multiple stakeholders' assets to be utilized strategically and cooperatively.

Improvement science is a technique, supporting learners with problem/opportunity definition, inquiry, and activation to respond. We connect improvement science with criticality and antiracism, supporting learners to consider the systemic and contextual factors that center their problem identification, building an awareness of antiracist methodologies to analyze the problems and to take action. We support learners to utilize improvement science tools and techniques, and we marry this with a liberatory consciousness approach. And we invite improvement science in as a practice, a foundation, rather than a method or methodology, because it emphasizes multiple perspectives and shared ownership of action.

Liberatory Consciousness

Scholar practitioners who choose antiracist framing for addressing their problems of practice require an extended cultural competence of the population they look to collaborate with, a strategic understanding of their positionality, and an authentic awareness of the power dynamics between various stakeholders within an institution. These intentional antiracist interventions look to avoid a deficit lens toward the population being researched, or researching with, and actively interrogate and implement multiple ways to bring about systems change. Navigating this challenging educational landscape as a novice researcher can be difficult, and the scholar practitioners in our program continue to explore new ways to engage in strategic institutional collaboration and partnerships as a liberatory approach to oppressive systems in education. This may sometimes require these important leaders, in their various spaces, to use district time and money creatively, yet strategically, while at the same time forming new political and community alliances.

This juggling act requires an educational leadership approach that applies *liberatory consciousness*, which can enable scholar practitioners to change "systems and institutions characterized by oppression to create greater equity and social justice..." (Love, 2010, p. 129). According to Barbara Love (2010), this process of developing a liberatory consciousness has been explored by several educators who have interrogated the dominant power system from Brazilian educator Paulo Freire to Carter G. Woodson in his

"miseducation of the Negro" to feminist, bell hooks, and humanist, Michael Albert. Love describes four elements to developing this liberatory consciousness: (1) awareness, (2) analysis, (3) acting, and (4) accountable ally-ship.

These four elements anchor the lens in which scholar practitioners in our EdD program approach improvement science as a tool for an antiracist intervention within a co-written dissertation. Love (2010) frames ally-ship with first needing to understand how our socialization has developed a limited view of one's role within a binary lens of dominant and subordinate. However, it does emphasize the value of accountability, particularly within moments where diverse and divergent thinking is needed and strategic attention is put toward potential and possibilities of perspective sharing. Love emphasizes that "...working in connection and collaboration with each other, across and within 'role groups', we can make progress in ways that are not apparent when working in isolation and in separate communities," (p. 602). This balancing scale weighing accountability and allyship proved to be both the catalyst and a technique in planning, implementing, and writing an antiracist co-dissertation of practice, and this was the case for both partners in their collaborative dissertation of practice journeys.

Experience and Practice with Collaborative Dissertations of Practice

Within the AU EdD program, Marisa Mendonsa and Brian Reilly partnered as members of cohort one, with our program's first joint dissertation of practice, and Samantha Cohen served as chair. Jennifer Beckwith and Ashley Royal, members of cohort five, partnered with our program's second co-dissertation of practice, and William Thomas IV served as chair. Each of these partnerships deliberately sought liberatory consciousness, through their strategic awareness of their partners and their chairs, their deliberate problem of practice analysis, taking intervention action, and on-going partnership to make clearer our roles, insights, biases, and socialization. It is important to note that these collaborations organically arose, because of the partners' interpersonal relationships, complementary interests, and shared geography. While the AU program continued to emphasize and celebrate liberatory and abolitionist ways of engaging, there was not a specific ask nor requirement for joint dissertations of practice, and the university was not encouraging collaborative dissertation work either.

Summary of Mendonsa and Reilly's Dissertation of Practice and Setting

Massachusetts is often seen as a progressive state when it comes to social support for its citizens. The state is often ranked as a top state in the nation for education. The majority of students and staff in Massachusetts continue to be White (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2022), and neither policy nor practice are creating antiracist education spaces within the state. As White administrators and leaders in two different, predominantly White school districts in Massachusetts, Marisa and Brian sought to understand why White public school administrators were hesitant to implement antiracist policies and practices and to identify the ways in which White leaders can acknowledge their privilege and use their privilege to disrupt White supremacy culture in Massachusetts schools. As part of our landscaping and problem identification, through the use of interviews with White leaders in three predominantly White school districts in Massachusetts and a

review of previous research, we solidified our knowledge of the problem of practice and an opportunity we faced. As our intervention, within our improvement cycle, we drafted a toolkit for White leaders to use when beginning their antiracism work; we collected feedback from the interviewees on the toolkit; and we shared the toolkit with White district leaders.

Marisa's and Brian's rationale for joint dissertation of practice

White leaders often do not think about race and racism in their settings and perceive a lack of outwardly racist policies, practices and tensions as a reason that their school or district does not need any work in this area. Both of us have had conversations with colleagues who believe that in White communities this work does not need to be done because everyone is equal and that this work is for larger, more suburban or urban districts with a greater population of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. White leaders often ignore their positions of power and the systemic racist ideals their ignorance perpetuates. As White leaders, we need to rewrite the narrative, identify the barriers preventing us from doing this work and recognize how our own bias has impacted the communities we work with. As White leaders, we also need to remember that we usually do not work in silos within the day-to-day of schooling, even in all White schools. We need to be prepared to meet all students' needs, including students of color. In taking a colorblind approach to antiracism, we are failing students by ignoring the needs of students of color and failing White students by not providing them with the education all students should have to live in a culturally diverse world.

We complement one another, bringing White male and White female identities, sharing our experience as two of the few White students within the EdD cohort, despite our shared White identity with much of the public education sector in Massachusetts. We also served as administrators in two different Massachusetts districts during the heart of COVID-19, where we were trying to figure out schooling and health and justice; and we had access to many other White administrators across the state, given the virtual meetings and professional networks we each hold. We connected at our first residency through conversation, and the relationship and trust we built there and beyond led us to want to take a risk with a joint dissertation. Our path to solidify a chair and seek university approval required sharing our rationale, detailing which sections would be written independently and jointly, and sharing how this aligned with the program and graduate guidelines. While there were some administrative conversations and processes, our path was smooth and straightforward, and we organically created opportunities to meet and write across Massachusetts for our dissertation of practice work.

Summary of Beckwith and Royal's Dissertation of Practice and Setting

Washington, DC is a city and region with many charter schools within the public school sector, and many of the charter networks have grown to be the size of small school districts. Large charter networks can cause leaders and administrators to work in silos which at times exacerbates challenges of norming equitable access to meaningful professional development, student enrichment programming, and systems for student advocacy. Within the largest charter school network in Washington, DC, serving over 4,300

students in the area, teachers and students face inequitable conditions in their schools. In particular, data from the annual Science Technology Engineering and Math (STEM) Fair for our network revealed clear gaps in how and when Black girls are supported and encouraged to explore STEM careers. The size of the charter network as well as its current and potential impact called for a uniquely different research approach that bridged the distant experiences of campus leaders and central-office administration. We looked to improve and disrupt the current systems of professional development for STEM teachers and programs aimed to support STEM enrichment for girls. In our co-dissertation of practice manuscript, we describe the need for a collaborative approach to our research.

Jennifer's rationale for a co-dissertation of practice

Our positionalities allow us to intentionally address and tackle this problem of practice from multiple, diverse lenses. From a district level lens, as a deputy director of STEM, I can begin to address the inequitable policies, curriculum, and resources mandated at the school level that directly influence the instruction of Black girls in STEM. I can also introduce multiple STEM programs and interventions, however, if the teachers and students are not invested, the program will not be effective, and Black girls' retention will not increase. From a school level lens, Ashley, as an assistant principal, witnesses the day-to-day problems that arise due to some of the policies, curriculum, and resources mandated by the district office. At the school level, Ashley, can authentically support (and change if needed) new interventions that will increase retention and interest of Black girls in STEM.

Collaboration is key, and our positionalities are key. All stakeholders' involvement (and investment) is essential if we want to implement real, systemic (nonlinear) change. Individually, we will continue to see pockets of success amongst Black girls in STEM, but together we can impact change holistically, creating continual, renewed interest and engagement of Black girls in STEM.

Ashley's rationale for a co-dissertation of practice

I had an epiphany that by aligning myself with an educational disruptor, like myself, who is passionate about science, I can accomplish my mission through the gateway of STEM. Aligning myself with Jennifer (a science educator) is where I knew I needed to begin my journey. We have similar passions (retaining Black girls in science and math) and career experiences. We are Black women who feel overlooked and unheard in STEM (science and math practitioners). We work in the same district but at different stakeholder levels, which was a bonus. She is at the district level (macro level), a system that I desperately need to gain access to, and I am at the school level, where her initiatives are often enforced or ignored by school leaders. As partners, we can align our mission to improve the learning sciences for Black girls in science and math but under the STEM umbrella. As we align our mission, I hope that we can provide more voices with similar concerns at each stakeholder level and use that influence to drive our much-needed agenda further throughout the district.

I feel this collaboration is a model that stakeholders can replicate throughout different school districts struggling to matriculate Black girls through higher-level science and math classes. I desire to do this by bridging the gap between science and math.



Joint Dissertations from Cohort 1 to Cohort 5

From our program's inception, we have communicated, and our EdD Handbook has stated, that the Dissertation of Practice exists so that research practitioners have an opportunity to engage in practical, antiracist work; aim to enact change; and write and reflect upon it; this is an opportunity for learners to demonstrate "expertise that showcases the candidate's mastery of inquiry into practice" (Wergin, 2011, p. 130). We encouraged disruption, creativity, and innovation, and we never explicitly discussed joint dissertations.

Within the inaugural cohort, there was a spirit of *build the plane as we fly*, which included charting new paths as they arose. Marisa and Brian embodied this. Within our initial acceptance into the EdD program conversation, Brian shared, "I am so excited to have this opportunity to be in the inaugural cohort." Within her interview and at the first residency, Marisa asked if joint dissertations of practice were possible.

And Marisa and Brian organically arrived at the possibility of a collaborative dissertation of practice. Within our early applied antiracist methods courses, we were planning for distinct dissertations of practice, where Marisa was focusing on White women leaders and their proclivity toward White saviorism, while Brian was focusing on special education and the overrepresentation of Black and Brown learners with this designation. As Marisa and Brian strengthened our relationship, we realized our similar working and writing styles, connected about our common Massachusetts geography, and understood and valued our identities as two of the few white scholar practitioners within the cohort. We wondered about the joint possibility, and approached Samantha, as program director and possible chair, during semester four of our eight semester journey.

We continued to hone our problem of practice, wondering if we would write two separate dissertations—one about White male education leaders in Massachusetts and the other about White female education leaders in Massachusetts. Samantha navigated the university policies and requirements, and I, Samantha, was positioned to do this as both program director and possible chair. Samantha was committed to this innovation, as it had emerged during the interview process and during cohort one's first residency on alternative dissertations and disrupting the education doctorate.

Navigating the approval process required a series of conversations laying out the uniqueness of our practitioner doctorate program, the first of its kind at American University. It required laying out research on collaborative writing, change within PK-12, and other examples of universities that had successfully graduated doctoral students with joint dissertations. A new approval process was created for how to petition for joint dissertations of practice in the future, requiring that the dissertation chair, the program director, and the students all agree that it is educationally appropriate. And approval was granted for Marisa and Brian to officially commence their joint dissertation journey, and Marisa and Brian remained open to the idea that this was a risk, and they were interested in taking this risk. While this process was bureaucratic, it was fairly smooth, and it is important to note that Marisa, Brian, Samantha, and the associate dean of graduate studies are all White.

Visiting Research Settings as the Dissertation of Practice Committee Chair

Dissertation of practice committee chairs play a crucial role in guiding scholar-practitioners through the research process, and one of the most impactful ways they can support their students is by visiting the research setting. While I could have supported the researchers through my own personal knowledge of the school, I, William, decided to fully engage myself in the research environment by physically attending related STEM events that could give both researchers insight on the school context from an external observer lens. This included me participating as a judge for the school's annual STEM competition. Not only was I able to interact first-hand with those who were participating in the intervention, it also allowed me to identify entry points where the researchers could be more intentional about their implementation. Because I was able to participate in the STEM competition as a judge, I was able to recommend to both Jennifer of Ashely, that they use participation data from the competitions as one form of measurement to the effectiveness of the intervention.

While this choice may expose committee chairs to vulnerabilities, such as confronting their own biases and assumptions or navigating unfamiliar environments, it also presents an invaluable opportunity to gain firsthand insight into the nuanced aspects of the student's research experience. By witnessing the challenges and dynamics of the research site, chairs can provide more tailored and empathetic guidance, ultimately enhancing the quality and relevance of the dissertation. This hands-on involvement demonstrates a deep commitment to the student's work and reinforces the importance of context in producing meaningful research outcomes.

This active engagement approach mirrors the practice of teachers performing home visits to better understand the context in which their students live and learn. Just as home visits can reveal critical information about a student's background, challenges, and support systems, dissertation chairs visiting research sites can uncover unique perspectives that are not always apparent through data and written reports. Such visits allow chairs to observe the interactions, environments, and cultural contexts that influence the research, leading to more informed and contextually grounded advice. This deeper understanding can help identify potential barriers and opportunities that may otherwise be overlooked, enabling the doctoral student to refine their methodology and approach in ways that are more aligned with the realities of the research setting.

Adopting this approach is also an antiracist practice, as it emphasizes transparency, authenticity, and strategic support in the research process. By engaging directly with the research site, dissertation chairs model a commitment to understanding and addressing the systemic inequities that may impact the research subjects and settings. This proactive stance encourages doctoral students to be more critical and reflective in their work, fostering research that is not only academically rigorous but also socially just. The insights gained from site visits can help ensure that the research interventions are culturally responsive and effective, ultimately contributing to the dismantling of oppressive systems within educational environments and beyond.

Institutional Support and Challenges

American University School of Education's core values are 1) excellence, 2) equity, 3) antiracism and social justice, 4) diversity and inclusion, 5) collaboration, and 6) innovation. These values, established under Dean Cheryl Holcomb McCoy's leadership, speak to the School's commitments to centering antiracist, practitioner-centered action, connection, and change. And Dean Holcomb McCoy and Associate Dean Corbin Campbell supported the EdD program's navigation with our Graduate Studies Deans and Associate Deans, paving the way for approval for EdD scholar practitioners to write and publish collaboratively.

An important commonality amongst the two joint dissertations of practice from AU is that both collaborations included chairs, serving as program director at the time we sought university approval for the joint endeavor. This positional authority, with access to the deans of the school of education and the associate deans of graduate studies, likely impacted our ability to seek approval and continue to push for approval, when traditional policies and understandings of dissertations were brought up.

While ultimate approval for these first two collaborations was granted, there remained university guidelines regarding which sections must be written together and how we ought to monitor to ensure that the work is shared equally. These notions that the writing should be split 50-50 do not stem from an asset lens, recognizing the positionality, intersectionality, and strengths that each team member brings. They also reflect a sense of compliance and a focus on technicalities, rather than an understanding of the hidden and invisible labor that goes on between joint writers.

Additionally, Ashley and Jennifer's collaboration was the second and last of our program's collaborative dissertations of practice, and when their approval was sought, after significantly more back and forth and substantiation required than Marisa's and Brian's, the program was informed that this would be the last case of a collaborative dissertation of practice. This interpretation of policy and return to the traditional, individually constructed dissertation/dissertation of practice, speaks to the resistance and concern within higher education about living into a present (and future) oriented reality of collaboration and liberatory consciousness.

Dissertations at the university continue to be viewed through an individual lens: one individual earns the degree and therefore one individual contributes to the dissertation. The dissertation is also an output tied to the doctorate and rooted in the history of academia, and this output has prioritized the individual's written word. And, there are no official policies restricting joint dissertations of practice. In fact, there has not been push back on collaborative, practice work. The resistance has been to the equality (or perceived equality) amongst the authors in the written manuscript.

And so, our EdD Handbook continues to honor the EdD as a degree for antiracist practitioner scholarship, pushing against the history of whiteness and individuality in the doctoral world. And, we will continue to support scholar practitioners who wish to pursue collaborative dissertations of practice, whether they come from the same educational organizations or if they meet within the program. And, we will continue to work with the School of Education's leadership team to pursue these possibilities with the office of graduate and professional studies.

Challenges and Opportunities with Collaborative Dissertations of Practice

As collectives (chairs and scholar practitioners), debriefing the collaborative dissertation of practice experience was woven into our work. Ashley, Jennifer, and William's debrief highlights important lessons for our collaboration, and we wish to share broader lessons here as well.

One significant challenge was the merging of Jennifer and Ashley's distinct writing styles. Jennifer and Ashley reflected on the strengths and weaknesses we brought to the dissertation of practice, and we shared that our differing approaches initially made it difficult to craft a unified, cohesive scholarly narrative. Developing a seamless voice required substantial effort to balance our positionalities while ensuring clarity and coherence throughout the document. As chair, I, William, advised them to be intentional with crafting the titles for headings to ensure that the readers understood the perspective that was leading the claims or rationale. Below, you will see how we were able to organize balanced voice for the manuscript, which was a university requirement to justify and identify the balanced contributions of each scholar practitioner:

1. Introduction: This section will be clearly distinguished to give appropriate framing of the rationale for the joint dissertation and its connections with antiracist research. Some of what we shared for approval for the collaborative dissertation of practice will be integrated in this section.
2. Problem of Practice: The majority of this section will be written collaboratively, however there will be some delineation between how each person interpreted their needs assessment/environmental scan as well as the influence of their positionalities on their determination of the problem of practice.
3. Knowledge Review: This section will be mainly written collaboratively, however synthesis of literature related to specific educational roles and content focus will be written separately.
4. Theory of Action: This section will be written collaboratively reflecting a collaborative consensus on the aim of the research, the systems acting as drivers, as well as the change ideas.
5. Intervention: This section will also be written collaboratively with clear distinction of each person's role in facilitation as well as data collection and analysis.
6. Analysis: This section will have clearly distinguished analysis of data collected within each contributor's unique positionality and school function within the intervention.
7. Implications: Implications of findings from data will be given separately from each researcher as it relates to each particular campus/content (school leaders) as well as for the greater network (central office administrator).
8. Recommendations: This section will be given two separate recommendations for campus leadership and central office leadership.

Another obstacle was finding collaboration time amid our demanding schedules and contrasting writing preferences. Jennifer preferred late-night writing sessions after completing her work responsibilities, while Ashley favored early-morning sessions. Our professional lives as district and school leaders were already hectic,



compounded by personal crises during the dissertation process. These conflicting preferences often made it challenging to coordinate feedback sessions, peer reviews, and revisions. Despite these difficulties, our commitment to maintaining open communication and respecting each other's time was key to navigating this challenge.

One surprising finding in our post-defense discussion was discovering that compromise was a particularly difficult skill for Jennifer and Ashley to navigate. Both strong-willed and accomplished experts in our fields, I discovered, as the chair, that they disagreed on what to include or omit from their dissertation. In my interactions during their research process, while I did not see any obvious tension among the two, Jennifer and Ashley explained that to address conflict, they established a structured process for resolving disputes, focusing on distinguishing essential elements from merely preferred content. This systematic approach not only streamlined decision-making but also strengthened their partnership.

One conflict Jennifer and Ashley jointly navigated was the complexity of joint work, in terms of time, load, and ambiguity. According to Jennifer, at times, she and Ashley struggled to empathize with each other's roles and time constraints, given the differing demands at the district and school levels. Balancing these competing priorities sometimes impacted their writing process, requiring flexibility and mutual understanding to stay on track.

One area that I, as chair, expected to be most challenging was planning and interpreting data. My prediction was correct as the joint data analysis emerged as one of the most formidable challenges. The scope of their research extended across two disciplines—math and science—and included data from both district and school levels. Additionally, they collected information from three different interventions. The sheer volume of data created difficulties in determining which data sets to prioritize and how to analyze them effectively within a limited timeframe.

Despite these challenges, Jennifer and Ashley celebrated several key successes while we reflected on the research process. Our ability to adhere to a list of non-negotiables, which included sacred writing and data analysis times. By honoring these commitments, we met every self-imposed deadline. Jennifer explained that our shared Type A personalities, marked by strong work ethics and organizational skills, further contributed to our success. The alignment of our work styles and dedication to meeting goals made our partnership effective.

Additionally, our strong communication skills and mutual respect fostered a supportive environment. We both felt comfortable voicing concerns, advocating for our disciplines, and acknowledging when mental breaks were necessary. This open communication not only strengthened our collaboration but also contributed to the overall quality of our dissertation of practice. Other areas of retrospective consensus were that we would have benefited from selecting a single intervention instead of three, more intentionality in determining key data sets before collection, and establishing a clear writing structure at the outset.

Possibilities for the Future

As chairs and program directors, it has been a gift to lay the foundation for joint dissertations of practice. We have witnessed how the partners navigated conflict (which is inevitable and part of all relational work); we have seen the joy and love shared by the collaborators; and we have seen the impact that is multiplied when you have a partner in the intervention and analysis and on-going

work. We also have seen how the collaborative work continues after the EdD journey between the partners and their chairs. Brian and Marisa continue to work across the state of Massachusetts, presenting at conferences, refining and implementing their toolkit, and bringing their research to their new administrative roles. Specifically, they are more confident and direct in the work that White educators, including themselves, must do in predominantly White districts. Ashley and Jennifer continue to refine professional learning for STEM educators and learning experiences for Black girls in STEM, and they intend to continue this in the next academic year, which follows their EdD graduation.

Lessons/Reflections as Chairs

The joint dissertation of practice journey is worthwhile in its liberatory aims. It enabled me, Samantha, to disrupt my static sense of what a dissertation is, and it felt authentic to live our values.....namely antiracist systems change with liberatory consciousness front and center. It felt empowering to create new structures for chair/scholar practitioner collaboration, to imagine what the joint document would look like, and to consider how the defense could look with joint dissertators. It also feels important to name that joint dissertations are part of systems change; all of our work in practice is collaborative, incremental, human, and based on inter-relationships.

As I, Samantha, reflect on our connections, I am most struck by the humanity, energy, and sense of possibility that our meetings almost always were filled with. Samantha, Marisa, and Brian met in February 2021 for a chair/scholar practitioner check-in, we shared so much enthusiasm and so many questions about the possibilities of a joint dissertation for Marisa and Brian. And that enthusiasm and those questions continued through the whole journey.....even on the night before Marisa and Brian's defense as Marisa, Brian, and Samantha met to finalize preparations. We all knew we were doing something new—and the energy, the nerves, and the enthusiasm were real. We were paving the way, eager for change, and grateful for co-collaborators and co-conspirators in our liberation.

And, now a few years later, we all know, we need to push even further—a joint dissertation that reads as the same traditional, written, lengthy document without re-imagining new products, new ways to publish, alternate approaches to community presenting and collaboration, is only a minimal step on the path toward antiracist, systems change. And this beginning is important to celebrate and to reflect upon as an EdD team, and as EdD programs, about what more we need to do to support EdD learners and graduates with disruptive, transformative, antiracist change in PK-12.

At AU and beyond, we also wish to push on regulations, administration, and bureaucracy to see the beauty, possibility, and necessity of collaboration. As higher education, in this moment, wrestles with its identity and future, this is an important time to learn from collaborative dissertators about teaming, working through complexity, and our collective liberation.

EdD programs sit in an essential place presently—they have the opportunity to convene and connect education leaders, the responsibility to facilitate and serve with antiracist, future-oriented principles, and the reach to impact education systems and catalyze collective ways of being. We have an opportunity to invite higher education institutions to authentically embody antiracism, and the six of us, through our collaboration, hope to convene and continue this very dialogue.

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