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Real Problems, Real Practice:

A Practitioner-Focused Approach to Comprehensive Exams

Jennifer C. Theriault
University of Findlay
jennifer.theriault@findlay.edu

Nicole V. Schilling
St. Bonaventure University
nschilling@sbu.edu

Amanda K. Ochsner
University of Findlay
ochsner@findlay.edu

ABSTRACT

The University of Findlay utilized Palmer and Giering's (2023) taxonomy of pedagogical innovation as a useful framework for examining and explaining how the programmatic innovation of the embedded comprehensive exams (ECE) evolved as part of its Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) program of the year award application. ECE are comprised of course-based assessments aligned with students' problems of practice and CPED principles. The pedagogical redesign improved students' research competencies, scholarly practitioner identities, and sense of belonging. Faculty experienced reduced workload and enhanced mentoring opportunities. ECE have empowered students to address complex, equity-driven problems within their communities contributing to the development of scholarly practitioners.

KEYWORDS

CPED, EdD, problem of practice, scholar-practitioner, pedagogical innovation, comprehensive exams

The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate's (CPED) program of the year (POY) award is given annually to CPED-influenced programs whose approaches and components might stimulate change and innovation among other programs. The process of preparing a POY application provides an opportunity for programs to engage in critical reflection and to document the stories and efforts of all stakeholders. As such, this article highlights our institution's process for implementing a notable innovation through sharing aspects of our POY final application. We first provide background on our program and its alignment with CPED's principles before describing the programmatic innovation identified in our 2024 POY application. Then we explain how we utilized the taxonomy of pedagogical innovation in higher education (Palmer & Giering, 2023) as a useful framework for examining our programmatic innovation. We conclude with evidence of the program's impact on various stakeholders, reflection, and recommendations.

Program Overview and CPED Alignment

The University of Findlay (UF), located in Findlay, Ohio, was founded in 1882. In 2024-2025, the total enrollment was approximately 5,000 students (1,000 graduate students and 4,000 undergraduates). The institution has six colleges that offer more than 85 bachelor's degrees, 11 master's degrees, and five doctoral degrees. One of these doctoral degrees is the Doctor of Education, which began in 2013. UF's EdD program mission is to prepare tomorrow's leaders to plan strategically, communicate effectively in the modern world, think critically about the impact of policy and decisions, and contribute to the knowledge base by conducting research in their areas of expertise. This mission aligns directly to CPED's vision and mission to produce equity-minded educational professionals that can lead lasting and positive change for the learning and benefit of all. Students in the program, typically current professionals, become scholarly practitioners who can lead through scholarly practice for the improvement of individuals and communities. To do so, the program requires them to conduct independent research that reflects a practical application of a relevant issue, or problem of practice (PoP), and contributes to the profession.

The program is offered completely online and asynchronously, requiring a total of 60 semester hours (18 core courses make up 45 semester hours and 5 elective courses make up 15 semester hours). These electives are based on the chosen strand: educational leadership, superintendency, or student support services. Three of the core courses are one semester hour credit associated with a dissertation research course which provides time for students to work closely with dissertation committees as they work on Chapter 2 (Literature Review), Chapter 3 (Methodology), Chapter 4 (Results/Findings), and Chapter 5 (Conclusions and Recommendations). This embedded dissertation, a signature pedagogy of the program from inception, guides students through the dissertation to prepare scholarly practitioners who can construct

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and apply knowledge to make a positive difference in the lives of individuals, families, organizations, and communities (CPED guiding principle 2). The program is grounded in four objectives, which align with CPED's guiding principles for program design.

The first objective of UF's EdD program is to "Identify problems within organizations and use strategic planning to make informed decisions that build trust," ("Student Handbook," 2025, p. 6) which connects to the idea that the Professional Doctorate in Education is framed around questions of equity, ethics, and social justice to bring about solutions to complex problems of practice and provides opportunities for students to develop and demonstrate collaboration and communication skills to work with diverse communities and to build partnerships. Identifying community-based problems and addressing them through strategic planning is an essential skill for leaders in education, business, and the helping professions. Through coursework, students reflect on themselves as leaders who can construct and apply knowledge to make positive differences in the lives of others.

The second objective is "Communicate effectively with diverse stakeholders in the most effective modes for the audience," ("Student Handbook," 2025, p. 6) which reflects the program's preparation of leaders who can construct and apply knowledge to make a positive difference in the lives of individuals, families, organizations, and communities and emphasizes the importance of the generation, transformation, and use of professional knowledge and practice. Effective communication is a critical skill for a person with a doctorate and is addressed through analyzing a PoP, exploring changing modes of communication, and utilizing multiple frames to develop meaningful solutions. Courses also promote thinking about the global world and how to communicate effectively with diverse constituents, preparing students to develop and demonstrate collaboration and communication skills to work with diverse communities.

The third objective, "Demonstrate critical thinking in relationship to public policy and its impact on stakeholders", ("Student Handbook," 2025, p. 6) is a focus because educational leaders need to understand the public policy context in which they work, as well as to be able to think critically about the impact of public policy upon stakeholders, particularly so that they can be leaders who construct and apply knowledge to make a positive, equity-focused difference in the lives of individuals, families, organizations, and communities. Courses provide students with the opportunity to apply critical thinking to major legal and policy issues through case studies and to develop a professional knowledge base that integrates both practical and research knowledge, which links theory with systemic and systematic inquiry.

Finally, the fourth objective, "Conduct an independent research investigation that reflects a practical application of a relevant issue and contributes to the profession", ("Student Handbook," 2025, p. 6) is the heart of our doctorate program. Students are encouraged to frame their PoPs around questions of equity, ethics, and social justice and investigate the current research literature through systematic inquiry to build a professional knowledge base to integrate practical and research knowledge. To contribute to the profession, students transition their dissertation research into presentations and publishable articles that share professional knowledge and practice.

Programmatic Innovation

A programmatic feature, the summer institute (SI), is a three-day face-to-face event each summer during which students: 1) disseminate and discuss their research; 2) construct meaningful feedback on the research of other doctoral students; 3) cultivate professional relationships with faculty and doctoral students that will support their research, presentation and/or publication opportunities, and professional/academic aspirations; and 4) develop research and writing skills through participation in interactive sessions and workshops. To facilitate a sense of belonging and engagement at the SI, faculty provide feedback on students' research, present their own research, provide training workshops (e.g., preparing an Institutional Review Board application which focuses on ethical development and execution of research), and strengthen relationships with students.

Initially, year two students participated in comprehensive exams through a traditional approach (i.e., a series of written exams associated with coursework) completed during the program's SI, which required the three faculty members serving on a student's committee to dedicate one of the three SI days to facilitate and evaluate students' comprehensive exams. Additionally, comprehensive exams were originally conducted with the dissertation proposal defense. As the program grew, faculty realized that the traditional comprehensive exam structure prevented students and faculty from participating in parts of the SI. Thus, students were not receiving the benefits of the program's mentoring structure during each SI. Students completing their comprehensive exams during the SI missed out on the development of their scholarly practitioner identities through participation in research workshops and presentations and interactions among students and faculty. These opportunities were designed to facilitate collaboration among practitioners learning how to utilize their doctoral experience to impact their schools, communities, and PoPs.

Data collected from the first graduating cohort in 2016 supported faculty concerns about the comprehensive exams preventing collaboration and participation. Feedback on the 2016 student exit survey indicated that only 11% of the student participants strongly agreed with the statement "I had opportunities to interact with my classmates" and only 13% strongly agreed with the statement "Faculty participated in all sessions I attended." Student comments included feedback like "At SI, students were all tired from comps [comprehensive exams]" and "No staff attended my dissertation [because] staff was stretched out trying to work with year 2 students." This type of student feedback indicated that the crucial aspect of mentoring was not happening at the SI as much as students desired.

In 2017, students continued to provide feedback on the annual SI evaluation indicating they wished for more interactions with faculty. One student stated, "I realize the structure may not allow for this, but it seems like the faculty would want to see more student presentations so they can see the completion of student work that they affected." Another suggested that, "It would be nice to see more professors in the general sessions." This type of feedback continued in the 2018 and 2019 SI evaluations. Further, the number of students in the program continued to grow. The size of a cohort ranged from 14 to 28 each year between 2013 and 2020. With cohorts averaging about 22 students, that size required faculty to dedicate much of their time at the SI to comprehensive exams. Likewise, year two students were not accessible to other students and missed most of the professional development and mentoring offered through the SI.

Based on faculty and student feedback, the UF's Doctor of Education Program identified that the traditional structure of comprehensive exams was not working and needed to be changed. This was due to several factors beyond students missing out on the benefits of the SI when engaged in comprehensive exams during this time: 1) as the program applied the guiding principles of CPED, the application of research to PoPs was becoming embedded in courses, thus making a separate and more traditional approach to comprehensive exams redundant; 2) faculty suggested that as subject matter experts in specific courses, they would be better evaluators of students' work relevant to course content; and 3) the increasing demands on dissertation chairs as a result of expanding enrollment made the original design of comprehensive exams unsustainable. Faculty believed that changing the structure of comprehensive exams would result in better outcomes for developing scholarly practitioners while simultaneously reducing the demands on students and faculty. Also at this time, CPED recognized that:

> now, more than ever, we need educational leaders who value the ability to problematize their practice and create reflective space in which administrators, faculty, and students alike can continuously improve…by continuing to innovate-in-practice, using CPED principles to develop exceptional practitioners that consistently bridge theory to practice. (CPED, 2018, p. 4)

As such, the innovation of the embedded comprehensive exams (ECE) originated from these factors.

In fall of 2019, the program embarked on revising the model for comprehensive exams. This innovation was founded in the work of CPED which advocated for the re-engineering and re-designing of doctoral programs and addressed Shulman's (2005) three dimensions: 1) teaching is deliberate, pervasive, and persistent. It challenges assumptions, engages in action, and requires ongoing assessment and accountability; 2) teaching and learning are grounded in theory, research, and in problems of practice. They lead to habits of mind, hand, and heart that can and will be applied to authentic professional settings; and 3) teaching helps students develop a critical and professional stance with a moral and ethical imperative for equity and social justice. As such, the revised model for comprehensive exams was by nature what Perry and Imig (2016) called "an innovation that is action-oriented, led by faculty and supported by university administrators, with the goal of improving the EdD for professional practice" (para. 2).

Process of Self-Study and Critical Reflection

The switch from a traditional comprehensive exam structure to the ECE began with faculty examining the CPED framework to ensure that the four UF EdD program objectives aligned with CPED's guiding principles. Faculty also created a key assessment and corresponding rubric to be utilized in each core course that, taken together, would compose the ECE. For each key assessment, students analyze a PoP in their professional context relative to the subject of the course (e.g., policy, leadership, diversity, etc.), investigate the literature on their PoP, and then create a plan to solve the PoP using the identified research. The ECE involves developing and demonstrating collaboration and communication skills to work with communities and build partnerships as well as generating, transforming, and using professional knowledge and practice. Further, the ECE design encourages students to examine PoPs through the lenses of equity, ethics, and social justice to bring about solutions to complex problems of practice and provides field-based opportunities to analyze PoPs and use multiple frames to develop meaningful solutions. Finally, the key assessments allow for the CPED-aligned process of posing significant questions that focus on complex PoPs, integrating practical and research knowledge through systematic inquiry, and utilizing data to understand the effects of innovation *throughout* their years in the program. The four objectives of the ECE include: 1) identify a problem, challenge, or opportunity related to your professional context; 2) describe in detail the nature of that problem, challenge, or opportunity; 3) analyze and synthesize at least three primary research articles relevant to your problem, challenge, or opportunity; and 4) describe in detail how you will apply what you have learned from the literature to solve or resolve your problem, challenge, or opportunity.

We utilized the taxonomy of pedagogical innovation in higher education (Palmer & Giering, 2023) as a useful framework for examining and explaining how the programmatic innovation of the ECE evolved. The associated six domains of the taxonomy–focus of innovation, degree of innovation, intended outcomes, barriers to adoption, risks of adoption, costs–are addressed individually while recognizing that these domains intersect and overlap.

Focus of Innovation

Through the taxonomy of pedagogical innovation in higher education, the focus of innovation may include assessment method, content delivery, course structure/design, curricular design, instructional development, instructional strategy, and/or instructional support and learning activity/assignment. The innovation of the ECE involved course structure/design and curricular design. As graduate courses were (re)aligned with the guiding principles of CPED, the course and curricular structures of the EdD program were fundamentally redesigned to incorporate PoPs as a critical element. This provided students with opportunities to apply research to PoPs *throughout* all core courses. Additionally, it allowed students to examine local community contexts to foster research rooted in equity, commitment, and ethics. As such, the assessments associated with each course were significantly changed to reflect this programmatic curricular redesign. Further, a broader range of faculty were able to provide input and assessment while students were enrolled in the core courses rather than waiting until the conclusion of the core courses (when standard comprehensive exams had been completed and were assessed only by committee members). This innovation enabled students to focus on what they were learning in each course and how their learning could be used to solve a PoP, which fostered the development of scholarly practitioners.

Degree of Innovation

Palmer and Giering (2023) suggested that there are four types of innovation: redefinition (i.e., novel teaching or learning that significantly alters some or all aspects of a program); modification (i.e., substantial change to design, formulation, and implementation of common teaching or learning practice); augmentation (i.e., functional improvement to common teaching or learning practice); and substitution (i.e., direct substitution of a common teaching or learning practice). Because the change to the ECE was initiated by faculty and implemented throughout the College of Education and the EdD program, this innovation was considered an augmentation. Moving to the ECE provided a functional improvement in the format, time, and location of comprehensive exams based on feedback from

the students and faculty. Rather than the traditional comprehensive exam that asked students to complete a one-time written assignment in person during the SI, the ECE was functionally improved to a more practical and realistic PoP reflection embedded within each online course so that students could focus on skills, knowledge, and dispositions needed to make equitable and transformative change in their educational contexts. As such, the ECE became a multi-semester, course-based learning activity that honored students' varying goals and needs that reflected their distinct professional contexts. Further, local contexts became an emphasis as students applied theoretical knowledge to practice and developed strong inquiry skills necessary as scholarly practitioners. For example, in one course students conduct research on a topic in their professional contexts, apply information literacy skills to analyze their sources, and create a digital product to help address that problem in their local community. Examples of projects have included educating to raise funding for the local schools, advocating to school boards to fund capital expenditure products, designing a podcast series to provide professional development to teachers, and creating infographics to inform the local community about relevant issues.

Intended & Consequential Outcomes

As Palmer and Giering (2023) explained, "an intended outcome is one that is explicitly stated from the onset of the innovation" (p. 6). Guidelines announcing this programmatic change explicitly identified the intended outcomes of the ECE. It explicated how the new design for comprehensive exams was based on CPED's focus to re-engineer and re-design doctoral programs "to strike a balance between the practice of education and research in education, in crafting doctoral programs to meet the needs of a diverse student population" (Shulman et al., 2006, p. 25). The document also explained how the switch to the ECE was grounded in inquiry as practice, which involves posing significant questions that focus on complex PoPs. By using various research, theories, and professional wisdom, scholarly practitioners design innovative solutions to address the PoPs. As such, the ECE requires scholarly practitioners to develop the ability to gather, organize, judge, aggregate, and analyze situations, literature, and data with a critical lens (CPED, 2022).

One intended outcome was for students to "be able to read, very critically and analytically, research reports…[and] be skilled in carrying out local research and evaluations to guide practice" (Shulman et al., 2006, p. 29). Another intended outcome for the programmatic innovation of the ECE was for students and faculty to have more time during the SI to build connections and add to students' feelings of belonging. A third intent was to allow faculty, as experts in their content areas, to be evaluators of students' work relevant to course content and students' PoP. Finally, an intended outcome was to relieve the faculty load associated with external comprehensive exams. These intended outcomes were explicitly communicated to students and faculty.

Barriers to Adoption

This domain describes known obstacles that will complicate or impede innovation and includes four sub-domains: instructor, operational, support, and department/institutional. Because faculty were unanimous in their voting for the ECE and faculty retained flexibility with the format of the ECE associated with their specific core courses, instructor barriers (e.g., instructor support, grading support, instructional design support) were limited. Faculty were asked to create key assessments to align with the ECE objectives and use the ECE rubric to evaluate key assessments within the institution's learning management system and assessment software. Initially, it was challenging for faculty to use the new evaluation system. However, with time, faculty created their own process for grading and evaluation across both platforms. Also, no operational barriers (e.g., course scheduling, enrollment size) were anticipated as the ECE did not impact these areas. Further, there were no expected departmental/institutional barriers (e.g., institutional/departmental culture and commitment, resource and support structures, incentives and rewards, teaching loads, or personnel policies). Rather, this innovation required a functional improvement to a practice commonly associated with comprehensive exams. Additionally, the innovation was applicable only to students who began the EdD program during or after Fall 2019, so no expectations were changed mid-program for students.

Risks of Adoption

This domain includes potential knowledge, physical, structural, or cultural obstacles that may complicate or impede an innovation. Specifically, an innovation can be at risk if it negatively impacts student evaluations of teaching, if it requires substantial time-investment from instructors, or if the innovation does not prove efficacious. Faculty teaching evaluations regularly demonstrate students' appreciation of the ECE. For example, one student indicated, "The most enjoyable aspect of this class was the practical application of the learned concepts to my work environment." Another wrote, "My favorite part of this course was how we had the freedom to review content that interested us. I liked how the [ECE] related directly to our professional experience." This innovation has proved efficacious and did not require a substantial time-investment from faculty; rather, it allowed for a distribution of the workload associated with comprehensive exams across semesters and faculty members.

Costs

This domain includes financial and human costs, which may be direct (on-going) or indirect (one-time). Because this innovation focused on course structure/design and curricular design, the major indirect cost involved faculty's time to redesign course assessments and the rubric so that the ECE were in each of the core courses as well as provide feedback on the ECE in their course(s). Another indirect cost was communicating the change to students. This innovation was shared via email and explained more fully at the 2019 SI. Because this innovation then became part of the program, there was not an on-going need to communicate the change.

Program's Impact on Institution, Students, and Communities Served

The four intended outcomes associated with the innovation of ECE included: 1) developing scholarly practitioners; 2) increasing time during the SI to build connections and add to students' feelings of belonging; 3) allowing faculty, as experts in their content areas, to be evaluators of students' work relevant to course content and students' PoP; and 4) relieving the faculty load associated with external comprehensive exams. As identified previously, this pedagogical innovation was "an adaption of a commonly employed

teaching practice or activity or a distinctly new, creative one intended to increase educational equity, student retention or persistence, sense of belonging, learning or engagement, or instructor engagement or efficiency" (Palmer & Giering, 2023, p. 3). We next provide exemplar evidence demonstrating how this programmatic innovation has impacted the institution, students, and communities served.

Impact on Institution

The impact on the institution is clear in two main ways. First, program evaluation data indicates that the intended outcome of developing students' perceptions of belonging and engagement has been met. Second, faculty reflections indicate how their engagement and efficiency has improved with the ECE.

In the beginning of 2024, a program student survey was sent out to all current students. Twenty-two students provided their perceptions of the impact of the EdD program. In describing their experiences as an UF EdD student, the words *supported*, *challenged*, and *connected* were the most selected (out of *supported, empowered, valued, challenged, engaged, inclusive, diverse, connected*, and *respected*). The terms *supported* and *connected* illustrate how students in the program perceive a strong sense of social support and have feelings of connectedness, mattering, and feeling cared about, which was one of the intended outcomes of the innovation. The EdD Program builds on Alba and Fraumeni's (2019) definition of engagement as "a condition of emotional, social, and intellectual readiness to learn characterized by curiosity, participation, and the drive to learn more" (p. 2). The selected term *challenged* in the program student survey demonstrates students' engagement and readiness and drive to learn more. As one student reflected on their experience in the program, they wrote, "This has been a challenging, humbling, and rewarding experience all in one. I have grown more professionally and personally during this experience than any other." Further evidence of the innovation meeting its intended outcomes include a statement from one student indicating "very useful assignments allowed me to apply knowledge within the class." Another mentioned, "The SIs are great for collaborative work and forming relationships with peers and instructors." Similarly, a student commented:

> I think one of the greatest assets of the Findlay EdD program is the SI. This time we get to spend together helps me feel more connected with faculty members and classmates. I have loved learning from those ahead of me in the program and now feel that I am able to help mentor the students coming after me. SI has helped me feel that I am a part of a community of practice.

In terms of faculty, this innovation allowed them to provide more thoughtful feedback on the ECE. In the original structure of comprehensive exams, most of the time was dedicated to the discussion of the students' proposed dissertation research methods and analysis. The written comprehensive exams were one part; the dissertation proposal defense was done at the same time. With the ECE, faculty have been able to provide feedback geared toward producing leaders in education. Particularly by guiding students to consider the extent, scope, and underlying root causes of the PoP, faculty teaching specific content intentionally focus their feedback to include practitioner insights as a key component of educational efforts. During the SI, faculty can ask questions about equity, ethics, and social justice, encourage students to consider multiple frames to develop meaningful solutions to PoP, and support leaders to construct and apply knowledge to make a positive difference in the lives of others. One faculty member shared:

> Under the previous model of comprehensive exams, there was one SI where I was not able to attend a single student research presentation or present in a single workshop session. I was booked with back-to-back comprehensive exams/proposal defenses all three days of the SI. It was frustrating not to go to my own students' presentations to support them, take notes for them, or be available to weigh in if they received complex questions. It was also frustrating not to be able to present to students or participate in panels because having access to faculty expertise and perspectives is in my mind one of the most important features of the SI. Now, I can distribute feedback to students on their dissertation proposals throughout the summer. And I can present and be active at the SI. It's been transformative for me personally.

Overall, faculty have been better able to contribute to the development of students' perceptions of belonging, their engagement, and scholarly-practitioner identities through more face time at the SI.

Impact on Students

The impact on students, in terms of increasing time with peers and faculty, was captured mainly through SI evaluation surveys. In the 2021 SI evaluation, student comments ranged from "Enjoyed having the opportunity to connect with faculty and other students," to "I am so glad I got to meet new people, received feedback on my work, and got to learn from other students' work." With the statement "I had opportunities to interact with other students in the program," 85% strongly agreed. This was an increase from the 2016 survey that indicated that only 11% strongly agreed with that same statement. Regarding the statement, "Faculty participated in all sessions I attended," 89% strongly agreed. One student commented, "I really appreciated spending time with my committee members." Again, this was a significant improvement from the 2016 findings that 13% strongly agreed with the idea that faculty were involved in all aspects of the SI.

Further, the ECE has promoted the development of successful practitioners into lifelong scholarly practitioners who improve and influence equity-oriented solutions for educational problems. In a study of this program's doctoral students' perceptions of their research competencies, a critical component of the scholarly practitioner identity, Gillham and Schilling (2023) utilized the scholar-practitioner research development scale, which consisted of 24 Likert-based items, to assess research competency in five areas: attitude toward or value of research, critical evaluation and application of research, research knowledge, research skills, and research dissemination. For each, students reported their competency at 4.0 or above (on a scale of 1- 5) each year between 2018 and 2021, with students most strongly agreeing with statements related to the value of research, evaluation and application skills, and research knowledge. This illuminates the program's commitment to developing students, who are predominantly educational leaders, to value, understand, and use research. Alumni also report the impact of the program on their scholarly practitioner identities. One shared:

> I can say I felt prepared to conduct research and disseminate it effectively in academic articles and conference presentations. I also feel I was well prepared to be a leader in the field of education as I regularly draw upon strategies learned in moving policy forward and team building for growth.

The impact of the ECE can further be seen in current students' perceptions of themselves as scholarly practitioners. In a recent survey, students rated the statement, "This EdD program is grounded in and develops a professional knowledge base that integrates both practical and research knowledge, linking theory with systemic and systematic inquiry" at an average of 91% on a numerical scale of 0-100%. Throughout the development of scholarly practitioners, which is supported by the ECE that require them to "use practical research and applied theories as tools for change" (CPED, 2022, para. 6), students blend practical wisdom with professional skills and knowledge to name, frame, and solve PoPs as well as use practical research and applied theories to result in improved understanding, experience, and outcomes.

Impact on Communities Served

The ECE provides six opportunities for students to name, frame, and solve complex PoPs formed by the intersection of theory, inquiry, and practice. As suggested by Perry and Imig (2016), we provide evidence and examples of our program graduates in action and the ways in which they have utilized their scholarly practitioner skills to be change agents by highlighting several dissertation titles representing a foci on equity and social justice: *Pathways to the Classroom for African-American Males*; *How Campus Support Programs Impact Former Foster Youths' Success In Higher Education*; *Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices Among Adult English as a Second Language Instructors*; *African American Vernacular English*; *The Achievement Gap: How Teacher Perception Impacts Instruction and Student Motivation*; *LGBTQ+ Students in Schools*: *Challenging Heteronormativity Through Best Practices of Inclusion and Social Support*; *Teacher Perceptions of Restorative Justice Practices in a Classroom Setting*; and *Gentrification: Measuring Neighborhood Change and Community Perceptions*.

Additionally, graduates have taken leadership roles within the state to effect change, which supports the program's mission to prepare tomorrow's leaders to plan strategically, communicate effectively, think critically about the impact of policy and decisions, and contribute to the knowledge base. This further produces scholarly practitioners who are prepared to foster a more just and equitable world, specifically within their local communities. One alumnus shared that the program:

> . . .provided me the opportunity to work in education in a position to make differences on a larger scale beyond a classroom or school building. I now feel I am involved in policy making, program development, and teacher development beyond anything I could have imagined before this program.

Further impact on the community is evident from 2024 program student survey results which asked about students' perceptions of how well CPED guiding principles were addressed. Regarding the principle focused on preparing leaders who can construct and apply knowledge to make a positive difference, 68% of respondents indicated a 95% or higher agreement. Additionally, evidence of this guiding principle is also clear through the ECE. For example, students have utilized the ECE to focus on their unique PoPs to address and improve curriculum decisions and teaching practices, including launching a new curriculum product for teachers, crafting a succession support plan for a new superintendent, and presenting funding proposals to the board of education. One student utilized the information she learned about school partnerships and inviting environments to create an action plan for implementing a partnership between her newly designated STEM school and local community botanical gardens. Another student examined what the literature had to say about teacher retention, a problem in her rural school district. Another student created a staff relaxation room to meet the mental health needs of his staff to improve school climate. He wrote:

> This project has made me think outside of the box and be somewhat innovative to address a need. In the book *Becoming an Invitational Leader*, Purkey talks about invitational leaders valuing respect and trust. I respect the staff and value them. I want their mental health needs to be met. This project will allow me to do this.

A different student identified the need for her school to embrace competency-based education processes to customize learning experiences for the students enrolled in her new virtual academy, part of an urban school district of 55 schools that serves about 23,000 students. She commented:

> Teachers need to fully understand the competency-based education process. This could affect current programs and processes because competency education focuses more on the practical application of knowledge and skills in meaningful real-world situations rather than just content understanding. This could mean changing some of our policies such as the current grading policy to reflect the mastery of competencies. This in turn requires a data-driven approach.

Someone else sought to shed light on the systemic, programmatic and/or institutional barriers, biases, and disparities that U.S. social workers face that inhibit African American students from achieving their goal of becoming a licensed social worker. She noted:

> By building on the ideals of Freire and hooks, and incorporating them with critical race theory, social work education can be a place that encourages change internally that builds change externally. Through changing how matters such as race, racism, oppression, sexism, and classism are taught and/or discussed in the classroom, it will make it necessary for institutional changes to occur along with changes to the testing and licensure processes. Long gone are the days of taking a colorblind approach to education, particularly as it relates to developing practitioners who are working in fields dealing with social justice.

Student comments like, "I am so excited that so much of this [ECE] was useful in my profession" and "I like how [the ECE] related directly to our professional experience" demonstrated how students have continually utilized the ECE to pose significant questions that focus on complex PoP impacting their communities, curriculum, and instruction.

Reflection

The University of Findlay's Doctor of Education program has undergone a remarkable transformation through the implementation of the ECE. This notable innovation is rooted in the principles of CPED and has demonstrated substantial benefits for students, faculty, and the communities they serve. Our students now engage in continuous, course-embedded assessments that align more with their professional contexts and PoP dissertations. This has not only enhanced their research competencies but also strengthened their identities as scholarly practitioners. The feedback from the students indicates a high level of satisfaction with the practical application of learned concepts and the increased opportunities for interaction with faculty and peers.

The ECE has redefined the structure and delivery of comprehensive exams, making them more relevant and manageable for both students and faculty. Through these embedded assessments within core courses, the program has ensured that students can apply theoretical knowledge to PoPs. This approach has also helped decrease some of the faculty workload initially associated with traditional comprehensive exams, especially during the SI, allowing for a more distributed and sustainable evaluation process. Faculty members have also benefited through the opportunity to provide more meaningful feedback and mentoring.

Finally, the program's innovation has had a positive impact on the institution by fostering a sense of belonging and engagement among students. For example, as shared above, the data from the program student survey highlights the students' feelings of being supported, challenged, and connected. Additionally, the ECE has enabled students to address complex problems of practice within their communities, addressing social justice and equity-based issues. The program's graduates have taken on leadership roles and implemented significant changes in their professional contexts as innovative, reflective, and action-oriented change agents.

Recommendations

Based on these reflections, our recommendations are focused on the need for continuous improvement and feedback, enhancement of professional development and support, and promotion of the dissemination of students' research. To maintain the momentum of program improvements such as our ECE, we recommend the establishment of continuous feedback mechanisms for students, faculty, and other stakeholders. Regular surveys, interviews, and focus groups can provide valuable insight into the effectiveness of these types of program improvements and identify areas for further improvement. This will also ensure that the program remains responsive to the evolving needs of its participants. Furthermore, we suggest using the taxonomy of pedagogical innovation in higher education (Palmer & Giering, 2023) as it helps structure the evaluation of innovation(s) as well as elevates the scholarly rigor behind program redesign. By addressing each domain—focus, degree, outcomes, barriers, risks, and costs—institutions can have a systematic approach to evaluating program innovation.

Enhanced opportunities for student and faculty professional development are also necessary to support program improvements. We recommend that virtual workshops, webinars, and peer mentoring and support programs be developed to complement residency programs such as our SI. This will help sustain the collaborative and supportive environment needed for successful program innovation. To support faculty, it is important to provide ongoing best practices in assessment, evaluation, feedback, and mentoring so they have the knowledge and skills to guide students through moments of program innovation.

Finally, we recommend that programs encourage students to disseminate their PoP dissertations through publications and conference presentations that can amplify the impact of their research. Programs should provide resources and support for writing and presenting to help students navigate the process of disseminating research for the field.

In conclusion, the process of preparing a POY application provided the University of Findlay an opportunity to engage in critical reflection regarding how this innovation of the ECE improved faculty engagement, supported scholarly-practitioner identity development, and enhanced student belonging and equity-focused inquiry. It also represents how critical reflection, stakeholder feedback, and CPED's guiding principles can be utilized to improve EdD programs.

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