

Who They Become:

Exploring Personal Growth and Identity Development in an Online EdD Program

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how students in an online EdD in Instructional and Performance Technology experience personal growth, focusing on shifts in autonomy, self-acceptance, and purpose in life. Using an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, researchers administered Anderson et al.'s (2019) Personal Growth and Development Scale (PGDS) to current students and alumni ($N = 44$), followed by thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews. Surveys indicated consistently high perceived growth across all PGDS domains, with the highest mean scores in self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and purpose in life. Participants described strengthened self-confidence, decision-making skills, professional relationships, and sense of purpose. Peer and faculty relationships and program structures were identified as key supports for growth. EdD programs can intentionally cultivate both personal and academic growth. Embedding reflective practices, milestone-based check-ins, and structured support may strengthen students' sense of identity, purpose, and leadership confidence.

KEYWORDS

EdD programs, personal growth, mixed methods, doctoral identity, scholar-practitioner development

Doctoral education has traditionally emphasized the development of advanced academic competencies, such as critical thinking, research skills, and scholarly writing (Leonard et al., 2005; McConnell et al., 2019). In EdD programs, this learning is often integrated with leadership preparation and applied problem-solving relevant to practitioners across various sectors. Although the academic and professional outcomes of doctoral programs are well documented, the impact of these experiences on students' personal development remains underexplored, particularly in the context of online, practice-focused doctoral programs.

Recent scholarship has begun reframing the way we understand doctoral education, recognizing that the doctoral journey often leads to profound personal change. As Zinner et al. (2022) noted, "the focus of the doctorate is no longer just on writing the doctoral thesis, but rather on the development of the individual" (p. 426). This human-centered view suggests that academic milestones are closely linked with evolving self-concepts, increased confidence, and growth in identity, purpose, and resilience. Current research on EdD programs supports this perspective, indicating that students often have to navigate parallel paths of scholarly development and personal transformation (Leonard et al., 2005; Nygaard, 2021; Savva, 2021; Zinner et al., 2022).

Although personal growth may not be top of mind when listing program learning outcomes, it is an outcome that many EdD students discuss, especially in programs that emphasize critical self-

reflection, leadership practice, and scholarly identity development. Unlike PhD programs, which emphasize academic research for theoretical advancement, EdD programs emphasize applied inquiry, leadership, and reflective practice in professional contexts (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate [CPED], 2020). Students might matriculate into doctoral programs seeking advanced credentials and applied expertise, but they often leave with a deeper sense of self, renewed sense of purpose, and expanded leadership capacity (Leonard et al., 2005; Savva, 2021). EdD program design, especially in online or hybrid programs, may play a key role in shaping these elements of the doctoral experience.

This study examines the personal growth outcomes of students and alumni in a fully online Instructional and Performance Technology (IPT) EdD at a regional comprehensive university in the Southeastern United States. Grounded in the practitioner-focused nature of the EdD and informed by Ryff's (1989) model of psychological well-being and Anderson et al.'s (2019) Personal Growth and Development Scale (PGDS), this study explores how students experience growth across five key domains: autonomy, environmental mastery, positive relations, self-acceptance, and purpose in life. Using a mixed methods design, the study combines survey results across four cohorts of students with follow-up interview narratives to illuminate how personal growth unfolds throughout an EdD program, and how it aligns with students' evolving identities as scholar-practitioners and change leaders.



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This research contributes to ongoing conversations about the value and impact of applied EdD programs. We invite faculty and program leaders to consider how personal growth can be intentionally supported and measured alongside traditional academic outcomes. As scholar-practitioners navigate their doctoral programs, their growth is not solely measured by what they know, but also by who they become. Investigating this process more fully offers important insights for those designing, teaching, and leading EdD programs committed to transformational learning and practitioner-centered educational development.

Conceptual Framework

The PGDS (Anderson et al., 2019) was selected as the guiding framework for this study due to its focus on context-specific psychological well-being by assessing personal growth in settings such as academic and professional environments. Rooted in Ryff's (1989) theory of psychological well-being, the PGDS extends this model by measuring how specific contexts, like doctoral programs, contribute to personal growth. Unlike more generalized personal growth frameworks, the PGDS captures the impact of structured environments on an individual's development, making it relevant for doctoral education (Anderson et al., 2019). The PGDS assesses development across five core domains:

- **Autonomy:** the ability to act in accordance with one's own values despite external pressures
- **Environmental Mastery:** perceived effectiveness in managing life demands and creating opportunities within one's context
- **Positive Relations:** the quality and depth of interpersonal relationships
- **Self-Acceptance:** appreciation of one's evolving identity and growth experiences
- **Purpose in Life:** having clear goals and a sense of direction that gives life meaning.

The PGDS was chosen for this study due to its emphasis on context-specific development, which differentiates it from other growth-related instruments such as the Personal Growth Initiative Scale (Robitschek, 1998, 2012) and the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). While these tools focus on self-directed growth or trauma-induced change, the PGDS is unique because it measures how growth emerges in structured academic and professional settings. This focus aligns particularly well with the applied, practice-based nature of EdD programs.

Literature Review

Doctoral education is widely recognized for its academic rigor and outcomes, but less attention has been devoted to its impact on students' personal growth and identity development. Emerging research has suggested that completing a doctoral degree is not only an academic pursuit but also a personally transformative process that cultivates confidence, resilience, and purpose (Leonard et al., 2005; Nygaard, 2021). Although this personal transformation has been well-documented among PhD students, there is limited research examining how personal growth manifests in practitioner-focused EdD programs, where students navigate the intersection of professional leadership and scholarly inquiry.

Doctoral Student Development in EdD Programs

The EdD originated at Harvard University in 1921 as a professional alternative to the PhD, blending rigorous scholarship with practice-based inquiry of real-world problems (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate [CPED], n.d.). Unlike traditional Ph.D. programs, which emphasize theoretical research, EdD programs emphasize applied research and leadership through addressing complex educational and organizational problems of practice embedded in students' areas of professional practice (CPED, n.d.). EdD dissertations in practice are typically embedded in students' workplaces, emphasizing real-world problem-solving, collaboration, and systemic improvement. These design elements offer a learning environment where academic and professional growth intersect as students navigate the personal and professional demands of doctoral study. Several structural elements of EdD programs, such as cohort models, faculty mentorship, and program modality, play a role in shaping applied expertise and student development (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Bista & Cox, 2014; Nygaard, 2021). Research has suggested that these elements can help foster a sense of community, promote resilience, and support identity development, especially among students balancing academic and professional responsibilities (Nygaard, 2021; Savva, 2021). By persevering through academic challenges, students often develop a greater sense of accomplishment and self-efficacy. Although doctoral education is widely recognized as an academically and personally transformative experience, few empirical studies systematically explore how personal growth unfolds in practitioner-focused EdD contexts.

Personal Growth in Doctoral Education

Personal growth in doctoral education extends beyond academic skills, encompassing identity development, confidence, resilience, emotional intelligence, and reflective thinking. While traditional measures of doctoral success, such as dissertation completion and scholarly productivity, focus on intellectual outputs, research increasingly acknowledges that doctoral study is both a professional and personal transformation (Nygaard, 2021; Wellington & Sikes, 2006).

Leonard et al. (2005) explored personal growth outcomes of doctoral students using open-ended surveys, identifying increased confidence, stronger self-discipline, improved emotional resilience, and the ability to think critically. Students also highlighted the development of lifelong friendships, professional networks, and a deeper trust in their own knowledge and expertise. These findings underscore the deep intrapersonal changes that intersect with scholarly advancement. Similarly, Nygaard (2021) described doctoral education as an "intrapersonal journey," highlighting how students transition from learners to independent scholars through a process of self-discovery, perseverance, and reflection. She emphasized how navigating challenges and setbacks often serves as a catalyst for personal and professional growth, shaping the transformation of scholarly identity. Savva (2021) emphasized the importance of cultural and contextual influences, and that aligning research topics with personally significant issues deepens students' sense of agency and purpose, reinforcing their growth. Together, these studies suggest that in addition to advanced research and leadership skills, personal transformation is a defining feature of the doctoral journey, although not typically recognized in program design. EdD programs offer unique insights into practice-based inquiry and leadership, which may facilitate personal growth in ways not fully captured by existing literature on traditional PhD programs.

Key Dimensions of Growth

Across the literature, researchers have documented several dimensions of personal growth related to the doctoral experience:

- **Identity Formation and Self-Perception:** Doctoral students often experience profound shifts in their sense of self, gaining an academic voice, refining professional identity, and recognizing their place within a scholarly community (Leonard et al., 2005; Nygaard, 2021; Savva, 2021).
- **Confidence and Resilience:** The process of overcoming complex research challenges, receiving critical feedback, and progression through milestones can strengthen students' self-efficacy and perseverance (Bandura, 1997; McConnell et al., 2019). While many students experience moments of self-doubt and imposter syndrome, these often gradually subside as they achieve key milestones and validate their expertise. The doctoral journey is frequently described as a test of endurance, fostering resilience that equips students to navigate complex organizational and leadership challenges in their professional lives.
- **Emotional and Psychological Growth:** Balancing the competing demands of coursework, research, and personal life fosters adaptability, emotional regulation, and stress management skills (Leonard et al., 2005). Students also deepen their self-awareness and critical thinking through reflective writing, peer dialogue, and iterative research processes. These habits support a mindset of continuous learning and adaptability (Savva, 2021).

Reflective Thinking and Lifelong Learning

Reflection is both a mechanism for and an outcome of personal growth in doctoral education. By engaging in reflective writing, peer feedback, and structured opportunities for inquiry, students improve their self-awareness, critical thinking, and ability to synthesize complex ideas (Savva, 2021). Reflective thinking helps students make sense of their academic challenges and professional experiences, and contributes to a mindset of lifelong learning.

For EdD students, who typically balance full-time professional roles with doctoral study, reflection also helps bridge scholarly learning and practical application. It allows them to critically examine their organizational contexts, develop leadership skills, and reinforces the connection between their own personal values and professional purpose.

Overall, the literature suggests that personal growth in doctoral education is shaped by complex interactions between academic rigor, identity exploration, and reflective practice. These developmental outcomes, though often undermeasured, are essential for preparing scholar-practitioners. To better understand how personal growth emerges in applied EdD contexts, this study draws on Anderson et al.'s (2019) Personal Growth and Development Scale (PGDS), which offers a structured framework to assess the cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal dimensions of student growth over the course of the doctoral experience.

Methodology

Research Design

This study utilized a mixed methods case study design to explore personal growth among students in a fully online EdD program in Instructional and Performance Technology (IPT). A mixed methods approach was selected to capture both the measurable outcomes and reported experiences of student growth. Quantitative data from the PGDS survey instrument provided insights into students' self-reported personal growth across several psychological domains. Follow-up interviews with a sample of current students and recent alumni were used to further contextualize the survey data. This design allowed for a deeper understanding of how growth gradually becomes evident within structured, practitioner-focused doctoral programs.

Context and Participants

This study was situated in the online EdD in Instructional and Performance Technology at a regional-comprehensive university in the United States. This three-year, cohort-based program serves working professionals across K–12, higher education, military, government, healthcare, and corporate sectors. The curriculum is structured around human performance improvement, leadership development, and applied action research focused on improving performance in students' organizations.

Participants included students across four cohorts of the EdD program, representing a broad range of experiences including students still completing coursework, those in the dissertation phase, and recent alumni. A total of 44 students completed the survey, and five participated in follow-up interviews. Of the survey respondents, 20% identified as women, 77% identified as men, and 3% preferred not to respond. Participants represented a range of industries, including K–12 education (20%), higher education (39%), military or government sectors (14%), and corporate or nonprofit organizations (14%).

Data Collection

Data were collected using the Personal Growth and Development Scale (PGDS; Anderson et al., 2019), a validated instrument designed to measure personal growth across five domains: autonomy, environmental mastery, positive relations, self-acceptance, and purpose in life. The survey included three demographic questions and 15 PGDS Likert-scale items. Survey participants were also invited to participate in a follow-up semi-structured interview to further explore their experiences.

The semi-structured interviews were designed to explore participants' perceptions of personal growth through the lens of the five PGDS domains. Interview questions prompted students to reflect on how their experiences in the EdD program shaped their development across these areas, especially program-specific elements such as coursework, mentorship, and the dissertation process. All interviews were conducted via Zoom, recorded with participant consent, and transcribed using the Otter.ai transcription platform. The interviews were conducted over the course of one academic year and represented a varied group of students in coursework, those in the dissertation process, and recent alumni.

Data Analysis

Quantitative survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize perceived personal growth across the five PGDS domains: autonomy, environmental mastery, positive relations, self-acceptance, and purpose in life. To examine group-

level differences, one-way ANOVA tests were conducted for each domain. Due to small sample sizes, patterns by gender and professional industry were explored descriptively.

Qualitative interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic coding. A hybrid coding approach was employed, combining deductive codes aligned with the five PGDS domains and inductive codes that reflected emergent themes. Two researchers independently reviewed and coded the transcripts, met to reconcile discrepancies, and collaboratively refined a shared codebook. To support this analysis and enhance reflexivity, AI-assisted tools were integrated into the qualitative analysis process as secondary aids. One researcher used Notebook LM and another used ChatGPT to help explore additional themes and validate existing codes. These tools were not used to generate findings independently but served as supplemental aids to support pattern recognition and additional reflection; however, all final coding decisions remained firmly in the hands of the research team, who engaged in reflexive discussion, iterative comparison, and triangulation. This exploratory use of AI tools aligns with emerging methodological practices advocating responsible human-AI collaboration in qualitative research (Turobov et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2023). Recent studies have emphasized the importance of treating AI tools such as ChatGPT as a collaborator that can enhance efficiency and triangulation, while preserving researchers' interpretive authority and reflexivity (Lee et al., 2024; Yan et al., 2024). In this study, our use of AI tools was guided by a commitment to ethical, transparent, and human-led interpretation, ensuring that all final themes and conclusions were grounded in the researchers' judgment and collaborative reflection.

To integrate the quantitative and qualitative data, a side-by-side comparison strategy was used (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This approach involved examining the convergence and divergence across data sources, highlighting how numerical trends aligned or diverged from students' descriptions of their growth. Findings from both data strands were synthesized to provide a holistic report of perceived personal development in the EdD program. Through this integrative lens, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of how students experienced personal growth within the applied context of an EdD program.

Results

Quantitative Results

To examine patterns of personal growth among EdD students in the IPT program, we administered the PGDS (Anderson et al., 2019) to current students and recent alumni. The PGDS measures context-specific psychological well-being with 15 items across five domains: autonomy, environmental mastery, positive relations, self-acceptance, and purpose in life. Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater perceived personal growth.

Descriptive Statistics. Across all respondents ($N = 44$), students reported moderate to high levels of perceived personal growth across the five domains of the PGDS. Mean scores for each domain are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Average PGDS Domain Scores

PGDS domain	Mean	SD
Self-Acceptance	5.61	1.33
Environmental Mastery	5.58	1.25
Purpose in life	5.44	1.34
Autonomy	5.41	1.18
Positive Relations	5.24	1.36

Self-acceptance emerged as the highest-rated domain ($M = 5.61$, $SD = 1.33$), followed by environmental mastery ($M = 5.58$, $SD = 1.25$), purpose in life ($M = 5.44$, $SD = 1.34$), autonomy ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 1.18$), and positive relations ($M = 5.23$, $SD = 1.36$). Mean scores were relatively consistent across domains, and these results suggest that students perceived development in self-acceptance, clarity of purpose, and confidence to manage environmental demands as a result of their doctoral program experience.

Cohort Comparisons. One-way ANOVA tests were conducted to examine potential differences in perceived personal growth across student cohorts (Cohorts 1–4) for each of the five PGDS domains. Results indicated no statistically significant differences across cohorts for autonomy, environmental mastery, positive relations, self-acceptance, or purpose in life (see Table 2). This suggests that, regardless of entry year, students reported similar levels of growth in all five domains of psychological well-being.

Table 2. One-Way ANOVA Results for PGDS Domains by Cohort

PGDS domain	F	P value
Autonomy	1.13	.348
Environmental Mastery	0.52	.671
Positive Relations	1.04	.390
Self-Acceptance	0.70	.560
Purpose in life	0.53	.666

Note: $N = 44$. Significance threshold set at $p < .05$.

While not statistically significant, descriptive trends revealed that Cohort 1 reported slightly higher average scores in autonomy and purpose in life, while Cohort 3 reported marginally lower averages across several domains. These variations may reflect contextual differences affecting that cohort (e.g., job changes, personal or professional responsibilities, etc.) but were not large enough to demonstrate statistical significance.

Gender and Industry Trends. Exploratory comparisons by gender and professional sector were generally consistent across subgroups, although the sample sizes were too small for inferential testing. Female students reported slightly higher average scores in autonomy and self-acceptance. Participants working in higher education and healthcare reported higher scores in purpose in life and environmental mastery. In contrast, K–12 and military-affiliated students showed slightly lower mean scores in autonomy and positive relations. These differences may reflect the ways in which professional environments shape students' opportunities for self-reflection, identity development, and application of learning during doctoral study.

Outliers and Individual Differences. Descriptive analysis also revealed a small number of outlier responses in each domain, primarily on the lower end of the Likert scale (ratings below 3.0), mainly in the environmental mastery and positive relations domains. These responses may represent students facing academic or personal challenges and could be explored in greater depth in future research. Overall, students' perceived growth was generally consistent across cohorts and subgroups, reinforcing the idea that personal development is a key feature of the EdD experience, regardless of cohort context.

Qualitative Results

To complement the quantitative findings, interview data from current and former students in the IPT EdD program were analyzed thematically using the PGDS (Anderson et al., 2019) as a conceptual framework. The analysis revealed several themes that overlaid with the five PGDS domains—autonomy, environmental mastery, positive relations, self-acceptance, and purpose in life—as well as several emergent themes that highlight the unique experiences of students in an applied, online, cohort-based doctoral program. Thematic analysis revealed thirteen themes across the five PGDS domains and emergent areas of student growth. These themes are described below and illustrated with representative quotes from participant interviews.

The EdD program has significantly influenced the personal growth of the respondents across several domains, fostering profound changes in their self-perception, their approach to challenges, their relationships with others, and their overall sense of purpose.

Autonomy: Growth in Personal Agency and Confidence

According to Anderson et al. (2019), autonomy refers to an individual's ability to develop internal standards and resist external pressures that conflict with personal values. Throughout the interviews, participants described growth in personal agency, specifically, increased confidence in their decision-making, scholarly voice, and ability to assert themselves in professional settings. They often described this growth happening alongside the challenge of overcoming self-doubt and navigating complex personal or professional obstacles. One participant explained, "I'm much more confident in my ability to stand up and say, 'This is what I believe.'" Another stated, "I now have more confidence in my expertise and can better make informed decisions." For many participants, this growing sense of agency was shaped by challenging moments that demanded persistence through uncertainty or discomfort.

Earning the doctorate itself was described as a "big deal" and a "big undertaking," resulting in increased confidence and self-efficacy. One student shared after earning their doctorate, "I can freaking do anything," adding, "I feel way more comfortable, a lot more confident in anything I have to write professionally, any research endeavor that I undertake." Students also highlighted specific cognitive shifts related to autonomy, such as developing a problem-solving mindset and viewing complex problems as manageable when broken down and addressed systematically. As one student put it, "[I can] break these incredibly difficult and big initiatives or projects or tasks... I know how to break them down and manage them and complete the goals that are in front of me."

A recurring subtheme within the autonomy domain was navigating feelings of imposter syndrome. Although students reported increased confidence over time, many also described intense self-doubt and uncertainty. One participant admitted, "I have not met a more capable, amazing, intellectually, advanced group of people, and so going in there and being like, 'I'm an idiot,' it's really hard, you know, like I've never dealt with such intense imposter syndrome as I have in this program." Others expressed feeling intimidated when presenting their dissertation work to senior leaders in their organization. Still, students often described these struggles as part of their growth process, and emphasized the growth that occurred through navigating discomfort and pushing through uncertainty.

Overall, the program fostered a gradual increase in students' self-efficacy and personal agency. Even those who wrestled with self-doubt or imposter syndrome reported a deeper belief in their capabilities by the end of their doctoral journey.

Environmental Mastery: Managing Time, Stress, and Barriers

The environmental mastery domain represents an individual's "perceived enhancement of one's ability to manage challenges in the environment, and to recognize or create opportunities within that environment" (Anderson et al., 2019, p. 2146). Participants described growth in this domain through their ability to manage academic, professional, and personal demands throughout the program. Many emphasized learning to balance their time, energy, and competing responsibilities, which were skills they attributed to both the expectations of the program and unanticipated challenges they encountered along the way.

The sub-theme of balancing full-time work, coursework, and family life was consistently discussed as a major challenge. Students reported that the program required them to become more intentional about how they managed their time and responsibilities. One student reflected, "I had to learn to manage my time and set boundaries like never before." Others described implementing practical strategies, such as following routines, prioritizing self-care, or saying no to outside commitments, to maintain work-life balance. For example, one student described adopting a consistent wellness routine during the program that they continued after graduation.

Students also described learning to adapt to both academic and real-world circumstances. Several participants discussed the challenges of bridging theoretical learning with the context-specific realities of their workplace. One student reflected on the action research process, noting, "There's a way that it happens in class, and there's a way that it happens in reality." For example, applying "solution-neutral" analysis approaches in organizations where stakeholders expected immediate action proved challenging. Other students mentioned adjusting to job changes mid-program, which often meant restarting coursework or redefining the scope of their problem of practice and research project. Students also mentioned the need to adapt to technological limitations, such as unreliable home internet connections, outdated equipment, or restricted software access. These experiences necessitated that students develop flexible strategies to keep up with academic rigor and professional demands. For example, one respondent developed a strategy of tagging information to review later when not understood immediately, to conserve their "finite amount of mental energy."

A third subtheme was the ability to persist through unanticipated challenges. Some participants faced significant unexpected life disruptions during their doctoral journey, including financial strain due to job loss, health issues, or frequent restarts of their project focus due to changing organizational roles. While students faced varied setbacks, they described becoming more resilient and resourceful. Describing their shift in perspective after a job change, one student explained:

Eventually I realized that the exact timing of my completion, you know, was less important than the quality of the overall journey and adventure ... I guess I just decided to embrace this mindset that allowed me to focus on my growth, my learning, rather than just crossing the finish line.

Another student noted that the skills they gained in the program made them "a more effective, empathetic, compassionate practitioner of helping people through change management." Across the interviews, students repeatedly described learning to manage complexity, developing realistic expectations, and persisting through barriers. These mindset shifts are key indicators of professional and personal growth in environmental mastery.

Positive Relations: Cohort and Faculty as Supports

The PGDS domain of Positive Relations refers to the development and maintenance of meaningful, trusting interpersonal relationships (Anderson et al., 2019). The value of social connection and supportive relationships consistently emerged as profoundly valuable throughout the doctoral experience, especially in the context of a fully-online, cohort-based EdD program. Two key support systems emerged as particularly valuable: peer and faculty support.

Several students described their cohort as a critical source of motivation and emotional support. One participant shared, "The sense of camaraderie was very potent for me and kept me motivated." The cohort model fostered a strong sense of solidarity and shared experience. Some respondents mentioned that the smaller size of the doctoral program allowed for strong bonds between cohort members, while others explained that the intimate learning environment taught them how to navigate conflicts and overcome preconceived notions about their classmates. Students mentioned the use of multiple communication channels like in-class discussion boards and external tools like Slack, which promoted encouragement and sharing practical solutions to challenges. One respondent described this support system as a lifeline, explaining, "We all did a good job of talking each other off the ledge at times." Residencies further strengthened these connections by providing structured opportunities for in-person engagement. Students described these experiences as transformative for building trust and a sense of belonging. As one student reflected, "I got to know my cohort members very well, and having the residencies was just invaluable in developing those relationships that will last a lifetime."

Faculty support also played a key role in students' development, offering both academic guidance and personal encouragement. Respondents frequently described faculty members as accessible, supportive, and consistent in their communication. Several students explained that constructive feedback, timely responses, and personalized mentorship helped them stay focused and persist through challenges. One participant summarized this support by describing a particular faculty member as a "trusted mentor and friend" who provided the "perfect amount of constructive

feedback and encouragement." Together, these collaborative supports contributed to students' personal growth by promoting a sense of connection, accountability, and emotional safety, all of which are core components of the positive relations domain (Anderson et al., 2019).

Self-Acceptance: Evolving Self-Perception

The self-acceptance domain refers to one's enhanced recognition and appreciation of their authentic self and the experiences that shape personal growth (Anderson et al., 2019). Across the interviews, students reflected on how the doctoral journey prompted significant changes in their self-perception, often framed by gradual, non-linear growth shaped by both success and struggle. For some, self-acceptance developed gradually through academic challenges, professional recognition, and personal reflection. For others, self-acceptance remains a work in progress. These shifts were gradual and often challenging, with students navigating feelings of inadequacy, vulnerability, and imposter syndrome before arriving at self-acceptance. Across interviews, three interconnected subthemes emerged: validation of self through achievement, navigating self-doubt and embracing authenticity, and resilience as a pathway to self-acceptance.

Validation of Self Through Achievement. A common subtheme involved validation through achievement. Several participants described how progressing through the program increased their confidence and shifted their self-perception. One student reflected, "Initially I felt overwhelmed, you know, but as I navigated through the research and the writing, the process of writing, I discovered in myself a resilience, you know, depth of knowledge I hadn't fully recognized before." Others described the program as a transformative challenge and a major milestone that generated pride and affirmed their confidence in their abilities. One participant explained, "It's a big undertaking ... I didn't quit. It was really big, it was hard, it was difficult. And so that gives me the confidence for almost anything in life."

Recognition from colleagues also played a role in reframing students' self-perception. One student shared a pivotal moment when a colleague requested their opinion during a high-stakes meeting, citing their doctoral expertise. They reflected, "It was just a phenomenal moment ... it was really refreshing to hear someone say, 'Hey, she has her doctorate. She is an expert in this area,' and to just really recognize my expertise as a practitioner and a scholar." These experiences validated students' expertise and reinforced their belief in their capacity to contribute meaningfully in academic and organizational spaces.

Navigating Self-Doubt and Embracing Authenticity. Even as confidence grew, many participants reported struggling with imposter syndrome and self-doubt, especially during the early stages of the program or during high-stakes professional interactions with organizational stakeholders. One participant admitted, "There's still part of me that, like, I'll go sit and I'll talk to these senior leaders about what I'm doing, and ... I feel like I'm still a little 18 year old undergrad." Others described how their self-perception fluctuated throughout the program. One student candidly described a mental rollercoaster: "Some days I'm like ... 'I'm going to be the best consultant there ever was,' and other days I'm like, 'I'm not graduating.'" For this participant and others, self-acceptance was shaped by personal histories and external stressors that complicated their academic experience. However, over time, students reported

becoming more comfortable navigating emotional and professional obstacles. Others mentioned that navigating academic processes, like scholarly writing, helped bridge the gap between self-doubt and self-belief. For many students, the development of self-acceptance in the doctoral program meant acknowledging their self-doubt without being paralyzed by it; rather, students learned to accept it as part of their growth process. Several students also noted changes in how they responded to adversity, such as asking for help more often or releasing the need to always seem in control. Students' recognition that growth is often nonlinear and messy is evidence of their evolving self-understanding during their academic journey.

Resilience as a Pathway to Self-Acceptance. For some students, resilience through adversity emerged as a key pathway to self-acceptance. Students discussed navigating various life challenges (e.g., health issues, financial strain, family responsibilities, or mental health struggles) while persisting academically, which pushed them to reevaluate their identity and capabilities. As one participant shared, "Despite having to leave work for a mental issue, I do feel that ... I've discovered new strengths. I've discovered areas for improvement, and my self perception has evolved in ways, or in a way that, you know, I don't think it can be denied." Others described how persisting through difficulties deepened their understanding of their limitations and their strengths. "The deeper I got into the program, the more secure I felt about taking action after thoroughly thinking through ideas, opinions and this process, I think it's led to a deeper understanding of my capabilities and my limitations," one participant explained.

Overall, students described a more integrated awareness of who they were becoming and what they were capable of, even in the face of self-doubt, by the end of the program. Although the path to self-acceptance was not always easy or linear, it emerged as a powerful outcome of the doctoral journey. Although feelings of self-doubt and vulnerability remained part of their experience, most students reported increased confidence, self-awareness, and acceptance of their own growth process

Purpose in Life: Renewed Direction and Motivation

The PGDS domain of Purpose in Life refers to an individual's sense of meaning, direction, and engagement in personally significant work (Anderson et al., 2019). Across interviews, participants described the EdD program as a catalyst for clarifying their goals and professional identity, and reconnecting with a deeper sense of purpose. Many students entered the program seeking to advance their credentials or develop specific skills, but over time they also reported gaining a redefined clarity of purpose and renewed sense of professional direction. Several noted promotions, role changes, or expanded professional responsibilities that aligned with their growing expertise and leadership confidence. One student shared, "The EdD program has further strengthened my assurance that I am exactly where I should be, where I work and what I'm doing on a daily basis is just the perfect fit for me." Others described applying new skills such as systems thinking and performance analysis in their workplaces, which helped them lead more confidently and strategically. For one participant, the program prompted a promotion to next level management, which the participant attributed to "my organization seeing the growth that I was experiencing as an individual in this program." They explained:

Now what I'm getting to do is apply all that I learned throughout the program and the many skills I obtained and acquired to my profession, which includes analysis of

situations ... I feel like I'm a much better leader as a result of this program.

Another participant described a mindset shift from instructional design to performance improvement, which they said made them a "much better instructional designer" able to defend decisions and evaluate larger systems. Mentorship and professional validation also reinforced students' shifting sense of purpose. A few participants described how the program supported them in forming relationships with mentors who later served on their dissertation committees. Others reflected on how the program motivated their career ambitions to pursue consulting roles, present at conferences, or publish their work, evidence of a growing scholar-practitioner identity that connected their academic pursuits with their professional practice. In addition to career transformation, many participants described a deeper connection to personal values and a broader sense of contribution beyond their job responsibilities. Several students expressed that the program sparked their intellectual curiosity, critical reflection, and a commitment to meaningful change. One student described completing the program as a privilege, saying it instilled "a deep sense of honor, pride, knowing that I have a chance to improve the quality of life for some people." Others reflected deeply about their future contributions, asking themselves questions like "what new relationships will I form? ... what role am I going to play in society, and how can I use my talents to contribute to the organizations that I'm a part of or that I may join ... in the future?" Another student explained how their research became a point of personal pride and motivation, describing it as "a treasure hunt" and a way to "navigate and contribute to the world in a meaningful way."

Across interviews, students described how the program supported their professional advancement as well as a deeper sense of social and personal responsibility. Through mentorship, scholarship, and critical reflection, they clarified who they wanted to become and why their work mattered. This evolving sense of purpose, encompassing both career transformation and broader meaning-making, emerged as a powerful outcome of the EdD experience. While this article focuses on findings aligned with the five PGDS domains, additional insights emerged that reflect the complex, practitioner-specific nature of personal transformation in EdD programs. These include changes in scholarly identity, the generative role of discomfort, and reflections on equity and access. A forthcoming article will explore these emergent themes in greater depth, contributing to a broader understanding of how EdD students grow as scholar-practitioners navigating complex professional landscapes. Overall, the PGDS-aligned findings illustrate how students in this applied EdD program experienced personal growth in various dimensions across all five domains. The following discussion considers how these developmental outcomes can inform program design, support structures, and student development in practitioner-focused doctoral education.

Discussion

This mixed methods study explored how students in a fully online, applied EdD program in Instructional and Performance Technology (IPT) experienced personal growth across five psychological domains: autonomy, environmental mastery, positive relations, self-acceptance, and purpose in life. Quantitative results from the PGDS (Anderson et al., 2019) indicated consistently high levels of self-reported growth across all domains, with the strongest ratings in self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and purpose in life. These findings were reinforced by qualitative insights that

illustrated how students built confidence, resilience, scholarly identity, and a renewed sense of purpose throughout their doctoral journey.

Patterns of Convergence and Divergence

Across quantitative and qualitative methods, there were clear areas of convergence. Students' high quantitative ratings for autonomy and purpose in life were echoed in their interview narratives about developing self-confidence, decision-making capacity, and clarity of personal and professional purpose. Several students described transformative experiences of asserting their values, finding their scholarly voice, and navigating personal and professional complexities. These integrated findings validate the PGDS as a meaningful tool for capturing the type of psychological growth cultivated in doctoral education.

Patterns across cohorts also showed alignment between the survey and interview data. Students further along in the program, or who had recently graduated, reflected more deeply on their development, suggesting that personal growth may progressively develop as students move through key program milestones, challenges, and supports. Differences by professional sector, such as slightly lower ratings among students in military and healthcare settings, suggest that contextual factors may shape how students perceive and apply their developing knowledge. While sample sizes were too small for inferential comparisons, these trends highlight the need for further study of how workplace environments impact doctoral learning experiences.

Theoretical Implications

These findings extend Anderson et al.'s (2019) argument that personal growth is dependent on context and reinforce the potential for doctoral programs to serve as "context-specific experiences" that catalyze psychological development (Anderson et al., 2019). In this study, the participants described increased autonomy, environmental mastery, and a clearer sense of purpose, which align with the psychological needs identified in Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and reinforce the development of competence and relatedness in structured doctoral learning environments. Students described identity shifts and professional growth across multiple domains, such as self-acceptance, autonomy and purpose in life, which reflects a sense of meaning that extends beyond academic achievement. These patterns of personal growth mirror the findings of Leonard et al. (2005), Nygaard (2021), and Savva (2021), suggesting that the EdD is a context in which academic expectations and psychological growth are mutually reinforcing. Therefore, personal growth seems to be an essential, rather than incidental, mechanism of doctoral work through which scholar-practitioners learn to lead change in their organizations.

These findings also suggest that the PGDS is a relevant tool for capturing personal growth in doctoral education. However, future adaptations to the instrument may better reflect the broad range of personal growth development in practice-based EdD settings. While this article focuses on PGDS-aligned domains of personal growth, additional themes related to the unique experiences of scholar-practitioners also emerged from the qualitative interviews. These emergent themes will be explored in a forthcoming analysis aimed at expanding current frameworks and capturing the complexity of personal growth in EdD contexts.

Program Design Implications

The qualitative data illustrated that students' growth was not a coincidence, but emerged from a well-structured learning environment that emphasized both academic rigor and sustained support. Faculty support, often described as accessible, encouraging, and clear in expectations, played a pivotal role. Respondents also emphasized how consistent faculty communication kept them "on the same page" while also helping them navigate complex tasks without feeling defeated. Peer support within the cohort model also provided a key source of emotional support, collaborative learning, and a sense of belonging.

These findings reinforce the value of intentional program design strategies such as integrating collaborative opportunities, reflective practice, progressive milestones, and supportive peer/faculty relationships. Intentional faculty support and strong peer relationships can be strong contributors to student growth, offering encouragement, constructive feedback, and a sense of connection throughout the doctoral journey. Programs that deliberately nurture a sense of belonging and support students through academic challenges may be particularly effective at promoting scholarly development and personal well-being.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study is limited by its sample size and focus on a single EdD program, which limits generalizability. However, the consistency of findings across methods supports their relevance for similarly structured practitioner-oriented doctoral programs. Additionally, while this study reflects participants' reflections at a single point in time, future longitudinal research could capture how personal growth develops across the duration of a program. Future research could also examine how specific program interventions contribute to personal growth across PGDS domains. Adapting the PGDS to align with applied doctoral program contexts, including additional dimensions of scholar-practitioner identity, or incorporating it into program assessment frameworks could offer new insights to guide program improvement and student support.

Conclusion

The findings of this mixed methods study offer a compelling overview of personal and professional transformation in the context of an applied EdD program. Though the academic demands of doctoral study are often described as intense, they also serve as a catalyst for meaningful transformation. Students not only developed new knowledge and leadership skills, but also cultivated a deeper sense of self, clarified their purpose, and built the confidence to navigate complex personal and professional challenges.

These findings highlight the importance of recognizing personal growth and scholarly identity development as intentional outcomes of doctoral education, not just incidental byproducts. When EdD programs embed reflective practice, structured faculty and peer support, and opportunities for authentic leadership development, they support both scholarly advancement and psychological well-being. This study adds to the growing conversation about scholar-practitioner development, illustrating how applied doctoral programs can be designed to promote not only dissertation completion but also the growth of empowered, reflective leaders prepared to drive meaningful change in their professional contexts.



Personal growth in this applied EdD program emerged as both measurable and integral to the doctoral experience, indicating that this element is an intentional, valuable indicator of program quality. The consistent PGDS findings suggest that when programs embed reflective practices, strong peer and faculty support, and scaffolded leadership opportunities, students develop as both scholars and confident, purpose-driven practitioners. Designing and assessing programs with attention to personal growth, alongside traditional academic outcomes, offers a more holistic way to understand and support the scholar-practitioner experience.

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