


The Activist Educator:

Defining EdD-Activism to Promote Equity and Justice

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ABSTRACT

In the Fall of 2019, the University of South Carolina hosted the convening for the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate. In one of the sessions, the faculty of Curriculum Studies (CS) asked participants to share their perspectives on activist profiles, program strategies to support activism, and quality indicator measurements for the development and support of activism. These perspectives were analyzed, and an emerging framework for EdD activists was produced. To develop the framework further based on program-specific needs, a committee was formed, leading to a participatory action research (PAR) study team of a faculty member and graduates of the program to generate a student definition of EdD activism, an EdD activism framework, and course reflections on social justice-related courses in the CS program. This article describes the PAR study's process, outcomes, cycles of inquiry, lessons learned, and future applications.

KEYWORDS

EdD activism, social justice, participatory action research

In October 2019, the University of South Carolina hosted the convening for the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED), a consortium of more than 100 colleges and schools of education that aspire to enhance educational practice through their EdD programs. In a session highlighting the theme of *Interaction & Activism in the Education Doctorate*, Curriculum Studies (CS) faculty asked participants to develop activist profiles, share strategies to support activism, and identify quality indicators to assess programs' support of activism. Analysis of these perspectives yielded an emerging framework for EdD-activism (Becton et al., 2020), and CS faculty subsequently explored what EdD-activism means to the CS program specifically (Currin et al., 2023).

Subsequent self-reflection and conversation led to a faculty-developed EdD-activism definition and the redesign of courses to embed activism and social justice more purposefully. *Curriculum Leadership* was one such course designed to address the interplay among leadership, activism, and social justice. Students' dynamic exchanges in the course inspired participatory action research (PAR) to infuse the perspectives of these change agents into the EdD-activism work of CS faculty. For this purpose, our team of one faculty member and three program graduates formed to generate a student-

graduate EdD-activism definition and framework, drawing from coursework and dissertation experiences.

LEADERSHIP, SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND ACTIVISM

We begin the article with an overview of leadership, social justice, and activism. These concepts grounded the redesigned course and our PAR.

Leadership

Leadership is a multifaceted concept critical for driving change and growth. Maxwell (2014) highlighted its dynamic nature, underscoring its impact on a system's efficacy, yet merely participating in leadership actions does not guarantee effective leadership. Carswell (2021) stressed that leadership qualities extend beyond positions or choices, and Northouse (2021) used trait theory to emphasize leaders' need to maintain self-assurance, prioritize relationships, and envision change to avoid ineffectual advocacy.

Charisma is key in leadership, enabling leaders to demonstrate competence and promote trust in decision-making (Northouse,



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This journal is published by Pitt Open Library Publishing.



impactinged.pitt.edu
Vol.10 No.4 (2025)

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

ISSN 2472-5889 (online)
DOI 10.5195/ie.2025.577

2021). Moreover, impactful leaders cultivate authentic relationships and learn from failures (Carswell, 2021). Weiner and Lamb (2020) emphasized that organizational change relies on personal learning that influences its depth and reach. Failure to support change often stems from a leader's shortcomings rather than the quality or necessity of the change itself (Maxwell, 2014).

Leadership also involves navigating decisions, from maintaining stability to crisis management (Northouse, 2021). However, self-assured leaders may struggle without team support, reiterating the importance of relationships. Collaborative problem-solving encourages unity and maximizes available resources, especially crucial for managing challenges (Carswell, 2021; Northouse, 2021). Collective efforts and buy-in are also necessary for enacting a vision. Socially perceptive leaders navigate organizational change by motivating others to take ownership of the vision (Northouse, 2021).

Leadership conveys strength, requiring leaders to leverage strengths while mitigating weaknesses (Northouse, 2021). Effective leadership prioritizes others' welfare over personal gains and enables an environment conducive to system growth (Maxwell, 2014). Leaders model how to foster organizational or situational changes, encouraging commitment and enabling change (Spears, 2022).

Constant learning and adaptation are essential as leaders navigate the interplay between self-confidence and self-assurance (Northouse, 2021). Because understanding the community's interests, strengths, and weaknesses is vital, leadership requires active involvement rather than passive observation. Leaders are constantly navigating dynamics within tiers of relationships and must maintain the balance of power in social systems.

Social Justice

According to Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017), "Understanding social justice means [being] able to recognize that relations of unequal social power are constantly being negotiated at both the micro (individual) and macro (structural) levels" (p. 199). Consequently, students and educators must negotiate their roles and positions in school and society. Cultural identity initially forms at home but further develops through avenues such as school and mass media (Foley, 2010). Learned identities create social subgroups, which, in turn, can create inequities—including in schools. Connell (1993) cited efforts "in affluent countries like the United States, Britain and Australia . . . to establish 'equal opportunity' in education via scholarships, compensatory education, desegregation, affirmative action, Assisted Places schemes, etc." (p. 17). However, educators must see social justice as fundamental to education rather than an afterthought (Gandolfi & Mills, 2022). According to Alvarez (2019), "Social justice is about distributing resources fairly and treating all students equitably so that they feel safe and secure—physically and psychologically" (para. 1). Creating a fair and equitable education system must be in the forefront of educators' minds.

Linked to social justice aims, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 were designed to "close the achievement gap between poor and minority students and their more advantaged peers" in U.S. schools (Klein, 2015, para. 3), in part by addressing teacher effectiveness. These initiatives also raised the question of whether to foster appreciation of differences among students or promote togetherness via assimilation (Williamson et al., 2007). Against this backdrop, Çevik et al. (2020)

studied administrators' interactions with and evaluations of various groups of teachers (i.e., categorized by gender, race, experience, and education) and described three types of (un)just supervision: sociocultural, economic, and political. Sociocultural injustice happens when one group is favored over another. Economic injustice happens when socioeconomic inequalities thwart equitable distribution of resources. Finally, political injustice is a failure to provide an equal voice across demographics when decision-making, leading to unequal representation. Thus, schools are not socially just institutions and may even promote inequalities (Collins, 2009).

For a socially just system, supervisors must (a) foster trusting relationships with teachers; (b) honor teacher voice and choice in their professional growth as autonomous, reflective, and ethical professionals; (c) develop a sense of belonging so teachers actually feel as though they are respected members of the school community; (d) support a school climate that is responsive to differences by implementing socially just mission statements; and (e) provide equitable access to educational opportunities (Çevik et al., 2020; Quan et al., 2019). To propagate socially just education, teacher activists must counter systems of oppression within their schools by implementing these principles. Picower (2012) studied how teacher activists worked in groups to give teachers a voice in policy. They developed empathy, an ability to recognize oppression, and efficacy in acting against inequality, providing equitable access to educational opportunities for those involved.

Social justice work in education is often pragmatic. Educators and administrators may need to be discreet to avoid scrutiny, chastisement, or disciplinary action (Ryan & Tuters, 2017), because "Schools are . . . not only places of learning, but also workplaces where staff, unless they agree with the current regimes, can feel devalued, deprofessionalised and silenced" (Gandolfi & Mills, 2022, p. 570). Faculty and staff who are frustrated can form small publics, as Stitzlein and Rector-Aranda (2016) noted, to move from private discussions to "the process of political dissent," building on "actions already taken by other teachers" (p. 167), while administrators can blend in with organizations to enact social change without being targeted and eliminated (Ryan & Tuters, 2017).

Educators who become EdD-activists need guidance to initiate positive change instead of opposition from school boards or special-interest groups (Çevik et al., 2020; Graham, 2021). To protect themselves from professional harm when challenging longstanding policies, teachers can form small publics where "they take risks and move beyond the safety of sympathetic audiences to frame problems and build coalitions and solidarity with other groups around those problems" (Stitzlein & Rector-Aranda, 2016, p. 166).

Activism

Existing scholarship has defined and described the work of activist educators in various settings, illustrating their goals, methods, and reasons for acting as change agents in their schools and communities. Activism in the EdD, according to Howard and Baker (2021), involves scholarship intertwined with community engagement, aiming to address systemic injustices. This form of activism is characterized by sustainability, adaptability, and methodological alignment with community-defined goals. As pivotal change agents, educators hold a significant role as mentors, guiding students through the intricacies of engaging in meaningful, ethical, and impactful work and research within communities. Educators are tasked with preparing students to become both scholars and

community-engaged leaders who can apply research skills to real-world problems. Training encompasses participatory research methods, ethical research, and the practical application of academic work to social justice efforts.

Operationalizing teacher activism, Picower (2012) highlighted theoretical fields that connect to social justice education in and beyond classrooms, concentrating on three so-called *commitments*. First, *Reconciling the Vision*, describes teachers' clearly articulated vision of justice. Second, *Moving Toward Liberation*, refers to helping students understand injustice and how to act for social change. Third, *Standing up to Oppression*, entails teachers' joining policy-making conversations to advocate for equitable education. Applying these insights to teacher education, Picower recommended developing students' empathy, ability to analyze systems of oppression, and efficacy in acting against inequality.

The most visible forms of activism are large-scale movements with press attention, but Zembylas (2013) encouraged *implicit activism*: small-scale, personal, modest acts that contribute to social change. This concept is valuable for educational settings that present challenges for activists. Because taking action to influence social change may spark conflict with people in power, educational activists have to understand their organizations and act strategically (Ryan, 2016). Moreover, lacking access to conventional networks and power structures, they may use unconventional tactics (Ryan & Tuters, 2017). Influencing social change requires a careful approach, mindful of the power dynamics educators balance.

In sum, teacher educators must prepare not mere professionals but activist educators who are equipped to counter policies that threaten their autonomy and ability to enact positive change. Encouraging teacher education programs to incorporate activism, Haywood-Bird and Kamei (2019) recommended practical assignments and activities such as analyzing activist group talking points, writing letters to political figures, and organizing or participating in town-hall meetings. Developing leaders with advanced skills to promote change within systems is essential for sustained, impactful educational programs. The EdD-activism definition and framework resulting from our PAR could serve as useful tools for such leadership.

METHODOLOGY

PAR is collaborative and democratic, with equal input from participants that removes barriers among research, teaching, and community engagement (Wood, 2019). Fusing the expertise and lived experiences of diverse participants and researchers, PAR synergizes the knowledge they hold (Kidd & Kral, 2005; Wood, 2019). Through reflective cycles of data collection and analysis, participants learn about their practices and take action that improves them (Baum et al., 2006). Participation empowers participants, encouraging their self-determination and personal growth (Hutchinson & Lovell, 2013; Kidd & Kral, 2005).

PAR definitions and methodologies vary across disciplines. They have evolved over time since PAR's emergence in the 1960s (Kidd & Kral, 2005; Lenette, 2022) because PAR's process is adaptable to fit different contexts (Wood, 2019). More than a methodology, PAR is a paradigm (Wood, 2019) and an approach to inquiry where participation occurs at any level, from the co-design of research to the co-production of knowledge (Lenette, 2022). It establishes a context for knowledge development and sets the

foundations for the research project (Kidd & Kral, 2005). Paradigmatically, it is constructivist, drawing from critical theory (Baum et al., 2006; Kidd & Kral, 2005). Therefore, it is dialogic and transformative, aiming for reform and emancipation (Ryoo & McLaren, 2010). Methodologically, PAR spans quantitative and qualitative methods (Baum et al., 2006).

As discussed earlier, our PAR study aimed at blending the expertise of academic faculty and the lived experiences of scholarly practitioners to co-construct new perspectives on EdD activism through dialogue and reflection. The goal was to develop an EdD activism definition and framework that stemmed from their practice to empower them to become EdD activists.

Participants

A call for volunteers to participate in the PAR study was shared with students enrolled in the *Curriculum Leadership* course. Although the sample was a convenience sample, it was also a purposeful homogeneous sample due to the students' exposure to the interplay of leadership, activism, and social justice in this specific redesigned course and the students' common characteristics in terms of professions and related experiences. The initial group of 10 students formed in May 2022 dropped to three by June due to busy schedules and other commitments. The PAR team that completed the study consisted of Suha, the faculty member, and Karen, Lorin, and Russell, all May 2022 graduates, referred to in the remainder of the article as student-graduates.

Suha is a Middle Eastern woman who immigrated to the United States in 1990. She has been a CS faculty member since 2015. In addition to teaching, she advises students on the dissertation in practice and collaborates with faculty on continuous program improvement. She redesigned the *Curriculum Leadership* course and taught the section her coauthors took. Karen is a White woman who has 37 years of secondary and undergraduate teaching experience in the United States and Japan. Currently, she teaches high school and college writing and literature. Lorin is a White man with 20 years of experience in secondary classroom teaching and curriculum development. He currently develops curriculum and teaches online. His scholarly interests include teacher preparation and integrating artificial intelligence into the classroom. Russell is a White man with 12 years of K–12 experience in both the classroom and administration and is currently teaching in higher education.

Data Collection

The student-graduates completed an online survey on EdD-activism adapted from one CS faculty previously used (Currin et al., 2023). The questions were:

1. What does activism look like? What are the characteristics of an educator-practitioner activist?
2. What does activism look like in educational settings? What does it encompass?
3. What are the characteristics of an activist?
4. What are the characteristics of an educator-practitioner activist?
5. What are the characteristics of an EdD activist? How would they differ from other educator-practitioner activists?
6. How did the EdD shape your views as an educator-practitioner activist?

Five student-graduates completed the survey out of the 10 who originally joined the PAR study. In addition, the transcripts of 15 meeting recordings documented our thought process to triangulate our analysis.

Data Analysis

We compiled the survey responses and coded them individually and inductively (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Monthly debriefing meetings and ongoing Google Docs collaboration followed, facilitating iterative, in-depth analysis, as we compared codes and organized similar ones into refined categories (Saldaña, 2013). To corroborate our findings, we reviewed the meeting transcripts, ultimately co-constructing an EdD-activism definition and framework. Both underwent further refinement through feedback from EdD students, 2023 CPED convening attendees, and CS faculty. This collaborative, dialogical process furthered our understanding of what EdD-activism looks like in practice.

Developing a Student-Graduate Definition of EdD-Activism

Wanting to reach a common understanding of key terms and issues to facilitate communication (Healthcare Design Group, 2017), we developed a definition of EdD-activism from the student-graduates' perspective, which highlighted EdD-activists' multifaceted role and stemmed from our own experiences with implementing change. First, we coded the responses to each survey question in a Google Doc. Then, we categorized codes using Quirkos, qualitative data analysis software. From these categories, we built the definition while repeatedly assessing its wording and accuracy.

Developing a Student-Graduate EdD-Activism Framework

Rycroft-Malone and Bucknall (2010) explained, "A framework can provide anything from a skeletal set of variables to something as extensive as a paradigm" (p. 45). They added that it can be descriptive of a phenomenon's properties and characteristics, explanatory, or predictive of relationships among characteristics and properties. Similarly, in the context of implementation science, Nilsen (2015) described determinant frameworks as categories that specify the types of determinants that influence implementation. To support student-graduates and other practitioners in becoming change agents, our framework emerged from student-graduate perspectives on EdD-activism, attuned to related outcomes. We consider our framework descriptive of the characteristics of EdD-activism, which could evolve to be explanatory and predictive, as Rycroft-Malone and Bucknall described, or evaluative of implementation, as Nilsen (2015) described.

Beginning with a list of the characteristics of EdD-activists coded from the survey responses, we sorted them into three broad categories: knowledge, attitudes, and skills. Like Capper et al. (2006), who proposed a social justice leaders' framework that incorporated critical consciousness, knowledge, and practical skills, we based our categorization on determinants that predispose and enable behavior (Morrison et al., 2013; Simons-Morton et al., 1995). Additionally, we drew from Northouse's (2021) description of leadership as a trait (i.e., ability, skill, or behavior). Through rounds of negotiations, we assessed the characteristics for categorical fit, seeking to convey the complexity of participants' responses.

We then incorporated these characteristics into an infographic. This visual representation of the framework went through multiple rounds of validation. First, we requested feedback from EdD students and recent graduates. Suggestions from the eight responses we received helped us evaluate the accuracy and effectiveness of our terminology and prompted us to change the tabular representation of categories to a Venn diagram depicting overlaps. After further negotiations and refinement of the Venn diagram, we presented it at the 2023 CPED convening to a group of 10 education professors and graduate students who provided feedback on each category. We repeated this process with Suha's 11 CS colleagues, yielding further team discussion and modification. The final Venn diagram presented in this article merged the various sets of feedback.

DISCUSSION

This section discusses the definition and framework that emerged from our analysis.

EdD-Activism Definition

We formulated a definition from our survey analysis. In our meetings, we each noted variations in the responses caused by our different experiences but also recognized commonalities and connections among the codes. For example, Russell said, "I did see some commonalities... I did feel like there was a common point of view through some of our responses." Suha confirmed, "We're coming from different angles, from different experiences and different settings, but this is good.... It's kind of a big umbrella for everybody to be able to find themselves in it." On a more granular level, we deliberated on the choices of words for the definition that best reflected the meanings embedded in the codes. For example, Karen indicated, "EdD-activism involves taking action to change the perspective of others... improve society through some kind of educational means... By questioning [and] disrupting the status quo, you include the diversity and equity in all of that," and Lorin attempted to identify, "the big question," proposing, "Is it beneficial change, is it productive change? Is it change that promotes more equity? And people getting access who didn't have access before to where decisions are being made." Our own experiences as CS students and educators illuminated our conversation. For instance, as we discussed the definition of an EdD-activist, Russell stated it should embody changing perspectives, recognizing issues, and engaging those involved. We agreed that seeing situations through others' eyes was important to include because empathy is an important part of being an educator, especially an effective activist educator.

These conversations culminated in a refined definition: *EdD-activism involves taking informed action in a compassionate manner to change the perspectives of and empower all members of a community, to foster diversity and equity by critical examination in an effort to improve society through educational means.* Figure 1 shows the codes from which key terms in the definition emerged. Comparing our definition with the CS faculty definition, we noticed a different focus (see Figure 2). Although both were grounded in social justice, the faculty definition leaned toward theory. In contrast, our definition, emanating from student responses, leaned toward practice, reflecting how each group's mental models and experiences framed their perspectives toward EdD-activism.

Figure 1. Definition of Key Terms and Selected Underlying Codes

| Definition of Terms | Selected Underlying Codes |
|---|---|
| Informed action | Research, Information Access |
| Compassionate manner | Advocating, Altruism, Passion, Motivation, Dedication, Caring |
| Change perspectives | Bias, Communication, Disruption |
| Empower | Advocating, Standing up for rights |
| Foster diversity and equity | Human Rights, Inequity, Labels |
| Critical examination | Critical Perspective, Changing Status Quo |
| Improve society through educational means | Supporting Learners' Access and Outcomes, Provide solutions |

Figure 2. Comparison of PAR Team and CS Faculty EdD-Activism Definitions

| Our Definition | The CS Faculty Definition |
|--|---|
| EdD activism involves taking informed action in a compassionate manner to change the perspectives of and empower all members of a community, to foster diversity and equity by critical examination in an effort to improve society through educational means. | Critical application of advanced knowledge of educational theory, research, and practice to resolve injustices or inequities through collaboration with diverse communities (Curran et al., 2023) |

EdD-Activism Framework

As we examined the characteristics from the survey, we concurred that they should align with the EdD definition. Russell said, "The definition is kind of like our thesis," and Lorin confirmed, "I think if we have a definition, the characteristics should come strongly from the definition." We also ensured the framework emerged from the student-graduates' experiences, purposefully avoiding characteristics found in the literature, as the following exchange shows:

Suha: I think we need to differentiate between what we pull from the literature and what we want to pull from our own experiences and perceptions.

Lorin: That would depend on what the purpose of this list is.

Karen: Isn't it helpful to pull in from the literature too?

Suha: But this is not your data.... And because we can pull so much from the literature... your voices and your experiences will be diluted.

Karen: That makes sense.

Lorin: Sure, that makes sense.

As mentioned, we grouped the characteristics of the EdD-activist into three broad categories: knowledge, attitudes, and skills.

Knowledge

Knowledge is an awareness of facts and their interrelationships (Simons-Morton et al., 1995). Therefore, under the category of knowledge, we listed characteristics an EdD-activist must have to understand an issue. We categorized codes related to cognition as *Informed* or *Reflective*, describing each category with its related

behaviors while negotiating the terms that best reflected the responses. For example, Lorin said, "Would you say educated or scholar can be collapsed together and knowledgeable? Which one of those do you think is the one that should be kept?" Karen responded, "I like knowledgeable," and Russell agreed. We later refined it to *Informed*. On the other hand, Suha noted, "Action without reflection is meaningless, and reflection without action is also meaningless. So, I was thinking maybe we need to be reflective when we talk about being an activist." Lorin said, "I see knowing the information being different from being reflective." Russell added, "Maybe reflective could be another point, and then we can flesh it out a little bit by going back and reading over all the notes." We agreed on *Reflective*, adding a bullet point based on feedback from the CPED convening on understanding risks. The following list represents the final characteristics for *Knowledge*.

- *Informed*
 - Seeks to understand the diverse experiences of the system's stakeholders.
 - Acquaints self with existing issues, ideologies, influences, and opportunities, and used terminology.
 - Researches current literature on approaches to change.
 - Seeks resources needed for change.
- *Reflective*
 - Recognizes own positionality as educator.
 - Understands own sphere of influence.
 - Reflects on the system.
 - Thoughtfully contemplates lives, situations, and opportunities to reveal injustices and oppression when they exist.
 - Examines personal and professional stakes, understanding risk.

Attitudes

Attitudes emanate from beliefs predisposing action (Simons-Morton et al., 1995). Therefore, under attitudes, we listed what we saw as the affective characteristics of EdD-activists that drive their behaviors. We categorized these codes as *Altruistic*, *Compassionate*, or *Engaged*, describing each category with its related behaviors. As we negotiated these categories, Lorin said, "I don't know if unselfish is necessarily the best term, but underneath that, I put empathy and community focus on the altruistic and compassionate." We also debated the use of compassionate versus passionate. Suha questioned, "These are kind of affective dispositions, right? I can motivate you, but compassion, it's something like you have. How can I teach you that?" Russell followed, "I'm leaning toward having compassionate ... a leader in activism without the compassionate part, you kind of...." Similarly, Karen reflected, "Community-minded made a lot of sense to me.... To say it all, awareness or cultural awareness, something about, you know, being aware of the surroundings and who you're dealing with and what kinds of issues you're dealing with." Additionally, in response to the initial framework, one CS student commented, "Is altruistic and other-focused the same?," which made us ponder whether the terms actually applied, how they applied to attitudes, and whether we should merge them. The following list represents the final characteristics for *Attitudes*.

- *Altruistic*
 - Focuses on solutions with direct benefits to affected groups.

- *Respects the lived experiences of others.*
- **Compassionate**
 - *Empathizes with others.*
 - *Focuses on community.*
 - *Commits to improving the experience of others.*
- **Engaged**
 - *Undertakes tasks with enthusiasm, motivation, and dedication.*
 - *Expresses willingness to defend just causes.*

Skills

Skills represent “the capability of accomplishing something with precision and certainty” (Simons-Morton et al., 1995, p. 256). Therefore, under skills, we listed characteristics that enable EdD-activists to act based on their knowledge and attitudes. We categorized codes related to action as *Leader* or *Communicator*, describing each category with its related behaviors. For example, on leading change, Suha pondered, “What’s the difference between the impact of the change and in contrast to being able to impact change?” Lorin replied, “I would look at that as kind of a visioning thing... the impact of the change is kind of the research phase or information-gathering phase before implementation.” Russell followed, “I think it defines [the vision for change] is good, where I don’t know if impact is the right one.” Karen concurred, “Right, because you need to know how to define the change and see what’s going to happen.” Consequently, we replaced *defined* with *articulate a vision of the desired change and its effects*.

Additionally, we discussed whether the vision of change should be imposed or stem from collaboration. Karen noted, “We don’t want people to think that we, you know, coming in with both guns blazing and saying this is the way it’s going to be.... So, I like the idea of putting in there something about collaboration.” Lorin agreed. As a result, we developed other bullet points under *Leader*. Based on feedback at the CPED convening, we adjusted the point about articulating a vision by adding *in different modalities* and reconsidered the controversial term *stakeholder* (see Sharfstein, 2016), changing the original statement *ensures buy-in from stakeholders when introducing change to avoid conflict and resistance to ensures that all people in the system have their fingerprint on the solution*.

About the category *Communicator*, Suha commented, “Maybe we can talk about the interpersonal skills of the person and then the relationship with others and society at large.” A student respondent had suggested, “How do you feel about stronger language for the skills section? Such as, develop willingness to lean into difficult conversations?” Another student shared, “The only thing I felt was missing was being an effective communicator and setting a vision.” Thus, we added *Communication* as a category, discussed what effective communication looks like, and listed related behaviors, leading to the following characteristics for *Skills*.

- **Leader**
 - Articulates a vision of the desired change and its effects.
 - Ensures that all people in the system have their fingerprint on the solution.
 - Mentors others to be activists.

- Empowers others and amplifies the voices of the marginalized.
- Makes decisions that are ethical, principled, and equitable.
- Challenges unequal / unjust outcomes of education.
- **Communicator**
 - Maintains open communication.
 - Listens attentively with a desire to understand the lives of all people in the system.
 - Is ready to lean into difficult conversations.
 - Overcomes communication barriers that keep the marginalized silent.
 - Collaborates with relevant groups and individuals to problem-solve and articulate solutions.
 - Advocates for others.
 - Spurs others to action.

Overlaps

Although three categories emerged from the analysis, we found areas of overlap—at first, with only vague subtitles. After consideration, we developed more specific categories for these sectors of the framework, refining the traits’ interconnectedness.

Knowledge and Attitudes. Sensing a negative connotation for the initial category *Critical of Status Quo*, we reexamined our codes and decided *Humble* was a better descriptor. One student had requested “Clarification,” reasoning, “Sometimes the status quo benefits students, especially if past practices have worked to create desired change. Perhaps instead of always being critical of what is, be reflective on what needs improvement.” Russell confirmed:

Knowledge gives insight into humility. I agree it is essential always to ask questions and listen to knowledge tell you which questions to ask, and humility tells you how to listen. The EdD-activist needs both to be effective. Without either, the activists will not be successful and cannot be overlooked.

Consequently, we defined *humble* as follows:

- **Humble**
 - Understands own limits to see others’ points of view.
 - Cultivates sincere curiosity about reasons for people’s views, avoiding snap judgments.

We added these points in the overlap between knowledge and attitudes because we considered humility to be a characteristic with cognitive and affective overtones.

Attitudes and Skills. As the team’s discussion developed, the dimensions of attitudes and skills needed to incite change began to form. We defined this overlap as follows:

- **Empowering**
 - Speaks out to elevate people who are not in positions of power.
 - Acts based on thoughtful reflection.

The term *Empowering* emerged as a concept that describes the result of having both an attitude to act or a willingness to take action and the skill to plan and strategize change, empowering EdD-activists to engage in the necessary work.

Skills and Knowledge. We extensively discussed the nature of change and the need for awareness of opportunities for change. In

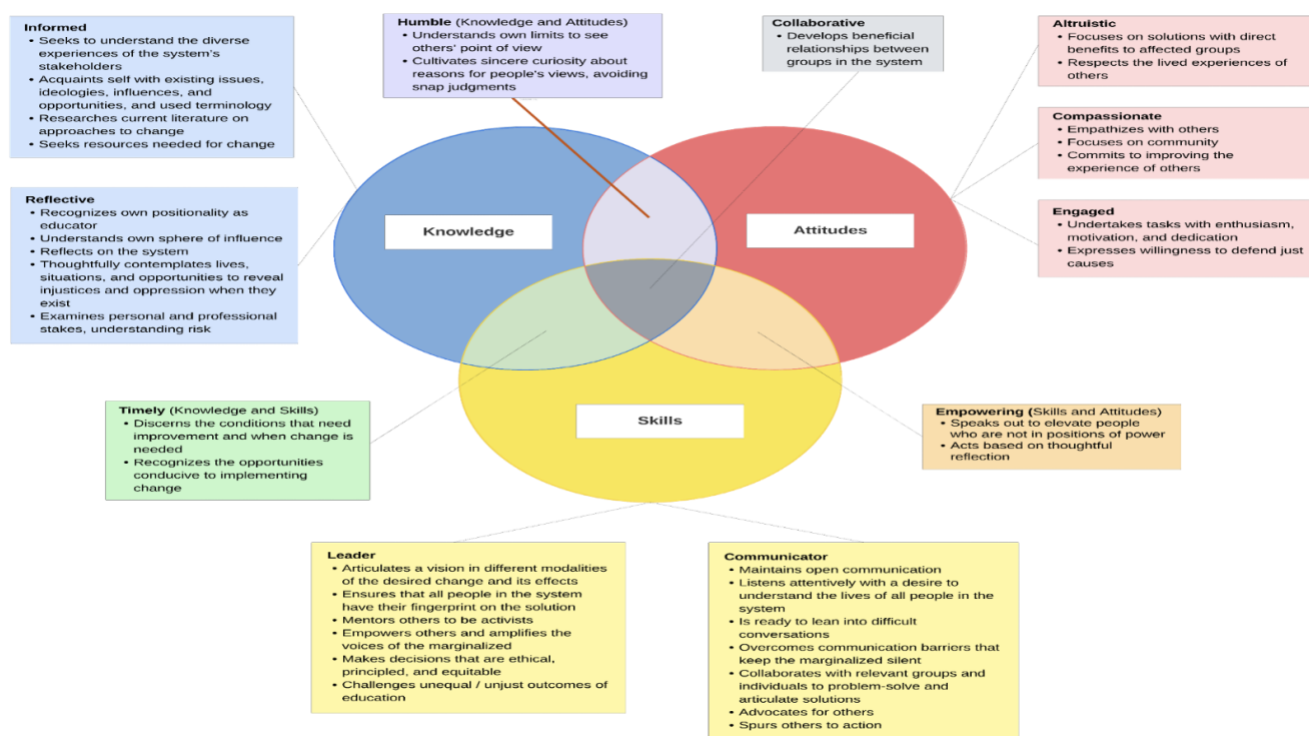
the student survey, one respondent commented that our initial statement, “Acts carefully in setting, in order to avoid being labeled as a troublemaker,” was unclear. In conversation, we realized an important aspect of what makes action appropriate is that it happens at opportune moments, considering different attitudes, cultures, etc. Russell added *Timely* as an encompassing term for leading change, yielding the following definition:

- *Timely*
 - Discerns the conditions that need improvement and when change is needed.
 - Recognizes the opportunities conducive to implementing change.

Our refined framework incorporated these points at the overlap of skills and knowledge.

Knowledge, Attitudes, and Skills. Initially, we interpreted the center of the Venn diagram as *Listening to and preparing others*.

Figure 3. The EdD-Activism Framework



REFLECTIONS

PAR allowed us to explore EdD-activism, balancing theory and practice, and develop a definition and framework that emerged from our and our peers' dual experiences as practitioners and doctoral students blended with faculty perspectives. Reflecting on his doctoral experience, Lorin said:

I did not come into the program realizing that there was a strong focus on justice and activism. Therefore, I did not intentionally build an activism component into my dissertation early in the degree. Gradually, the classes on diversity in the CS program helped me understand more. Reflecting on the process, I saw that significant elements of my dissertation were clearly activist in nature, even without setting out to

However, after revisiting our codes and the feedback we received during the validation period, we broadened the label to *Collaborative* to show how it encompasses all three categories, defining it as follows: Develops beneficial relationships between groups in the system.

Revising the framework was challenging, as fitting different codes into the broader categories pushed us to decide which bullet points went under each subcategory. For example, we discussed the choice of the term *altruistic* multiple times, and a student asked at one point whether mentoring others is a characteristic of leadership skills or communication skills. Overall, we feel that we created a usable framework that ultimately became a living document that will shift to meet the needs of those who utilize it while staying broad enough to encompass most, if not all, aspiring and practicing EdD-activists. The final version appears in Figure 3.

include that component. My dissertation adviser emphasized this point, encouraging me to observe the activist elements of what I was already doing. This, combined with the articles by Ryan (2016) and Ryan and Tuters (2017), changed my perspective. I realized that it is common to view activism as big actions done publicly. In reality, activism can be accomplished in many different ways and settings, whether in front of people or completely behind the scenes. My involvement in this study confirms this understanding by showing that the skills, attitudes, and knowledge involved in activism can be part of any setting.

Karen shared:

When I started the CS program at The University of South Carolina, I had a very limited idea about diversity, equity, and

inclusion. I had an even more limited view of what it means to be an activist in education. With my first classes, I learned that I can make a difference and take on a larger role to help make the education system more equitable for all. I wish I had been made to complete small activist studies early in the program because once I learned that my dissertation must include activism, I was concerned that I would not be able to make any difference. Later, I realized how even small steps can create change and included actions I planned to take after my defense (which I subsequently completed). Participating in this study showed me how like-minded people can promote change and aid in progressing activism through research and discussion that is taken to many others so they can add their own thoughts and experiences.

Russell revealed:

As I reflect on the impact of the EdD program, I realize how it has transformed my perspectives and equipped me to drive change not just within my sphere of influence but also in the wider community when it comes to addressing diversity issues. It has provided me with the necessary tools to support all learners, irrespective of their backgrounds, while also equipping me with a steadfast conviction to advocate for social change. This empowerment has gone beyond just raising awareness, instilling in me a sense of agency and commitment to engage with local, state, and national stakeholders. This PAR study has taken me on a journey of individual growth, helping me better my current perspectives and knowledge and giving me a deeper understanding of social issues.

Suha, as course designer of *Curriculum Leadership* and faculty member collaborating on shaping EdD activism in the CS program, said:

Our CS curriculum is continuously evolving to align with the CPED Framework in "creating quality, rigorous practitioner preparation" and framing the doctorate "around questions of equity, ethics, and social justice" (CPED, 2022, The CPED Framework section). We strive to strengthen the social justice component, encouraging students to see themselves as agents of change and activists. The experiences of Karen, Lorin, and Russell mirror the growth we see in all of our students when completing their dissertations and developing action plans grounded in learning gained through their doctoral journey to continue the improvement cycle and act as advocates in their educational systems. Going further, this PAR study revealed the power of dialogue and interchange between academics and practice. Reciprocity revealed itself as empowerment for Karen, Lorin, and Russell in leading change and with insights to Suha for improvement in the CS program.

Moving forward, we anticipate merging our findings with those of Becton et al. (2020) and Currin et al. (2023) to support the CS program's effort to prepare students to become empowered EdD-activists.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our iterations in finalizing the EdD-activism framework surfaced the following recommendations. At the practice level, the framework provides educators with observable actions based on knowledge, skills, and attitudes that can justify their decision-making. Moreover, it acts as a guiding structure, supplying clarity for educators as they navigate complexities by developing an awareness of self. By stressing the strength of their personal characteristics within this framework, teachers can leverage their perspectives to address diverse needs effectively. The framework can also inform in-service

teacher training that implements leadership, social justice, and activism as professional development topics to make education more equitable and available to all. Ultimately, this framework can foster awareness of the need for assertive and strategic action.

On the other hand, we view this framework as a living document. The framework can be shared with educators connected to EdD programs to refine it continuously, especially after testing and use. Incorporating it into courses could generate additional input from students and faculty to fine-tune it. This input could provide the foundation to change the descriptive nature of the framework to explanatory or predictive by clarifying or predicting causal relationships, (Rycroft-Malone & Bucknall, 2010), or evaluative to determine success (Nilsen, 2015). We hope its visual representation inspires educators, providing them with mental models and encouraging them to become EdD-activists.

LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES

An important limitation of our PAR study is the small number of collaborators in addition to the small number of survey respondents in comparison to the large student body in the CS program, hence our effort to generate feedback from the CS faculty and at the CPED convening, in addition to our recommendation to disseminate the definition and framework to students and practitioners in educational settings for testing and feedback. Another limitation lies in the difficulty of avoiding bias on our part, which made us reflect deeply on our selection of terms. Finally, we had to be conscientious in incorporating the feedback responses that aligned with the purpose of the study and provided data that guided the definition and framework development.

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