

Interrogating Integration: Reconceptualizing Doctoral Program Self-Study as a Window for Collaborative and Reflective Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative self-study examined the integration of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) Framework®, specifically the six guiding principles, within an EdD program. Triangulating evidence from program artifacts and stakeholder focus groups, the program achieved Exemplary ratings across all six principles using the CPED Guiding Principles Implementation Rubric. However, the study revealed critical limitations in presence/absence scoring, noting a lack of explicit CPED language in documents and the risk of overstating integration when principles are merely identified rather than examining how they are enacted. These findings highlight the necessity for self-study designs that evaluate the depth, coherence, and purposeful application of CPED principles. Ultimately, this research argues that doctoral program self-study must transcend basic compliance metrics to become a collaborative, reflective process that drives intentional program redesign and continuous improvement.

KEYWORDS

doctoral education, program self-study, CPED Framework®, reflective inquiry

Research on graduate and professional program review consistently underscores that doctoral program self-study is most impactful when it functions as a structured process of collective learning and evidence-based decision-making rather than as a compliance exercise. The Council of Graduate Schools emphasizes that effective program review integrates assessment data, stakeholder input, and forward-looking planning to support continuous improvement rather than merely documentation for accountability (Baker et al., 2011). Similarly, Banta and Palomba (2015) argue that assessment only enhances student learning when it is embedded within a culture of inquiry and used to inform curricular and structural change.

Self-study, therefore, provides doctoral programs with a systematic opportunity to critically examine their practices by intentionally bringing multiple perspectives into dialogue and challenging taken-for-granted assumptions. Rather than confirming existing beliefs, self-study research seeks “to provoke, challenge, and illuminate” (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 20) through collaborative and reflective inquiry (Berry & Kitchen, 2023; Coia & Taylor, 2009). Within Education Doctorate (EdD) programs, this process serves as a mechanism to scrutinize the program’s accomplishments, identify areas for growth, and clarify future directions (Baker et al., 2011). Taken together, the literature

suggests that the value of doctoral self-study lies not in producing a report, but in producing learning that can lead to intentional program redesign.

A major benefit of self-study, or self-scrutiny, is its capacity to heighten faculty awareness of program complexity (Messer et al., 1992) and to function as a mirror or window through which faculty gain new insights into their collective work (Taylor & Diamond, 2020). It is also an opportunity for faculty to engage in collaborative, transformative learning (Strom & Portillo, 2019), positioning faculty as both knowers and learners engaged in systematic, intentional inquiry (LaBoskey, 2004). In the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED)-aligned contexts, faculty are not only instructors; they are stewards of the profession who shape program purpose, coherence, and continuous improvement. Shulman et al. (2006) describe stewardship as integrating knowledge generation, responsible practice, and the ethical advancement of a field, responsibilities that directly inform the design and assessment of EdD programs. Likewise, Brooks and Heiland (2007) argue that faculty-driven assessment of program goals and outcomes is ideal to ensure program quality and rigor. Ultimately, faculty can engage the CPED principles as a means of program assessment and continuous improvement (Phillips et al., 2018).



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This journal is published by Pitt Open Library Publishing.



impacting.ed.pitt.edu
Vol.11 No.4 (2026)

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.2026.623

Framed in this way, a research team of four faculty members and one graduate research assistant at the University of Findlay (UF) engaged in self-study to examine how the elements of the CPED Framework© are integrated into our program. Specifically, this study was guided by the following research question: What is the degree of integration of CPED's six principles within the UF EdD program? Because our college had a new program chair, we viewed this CPED Principles Implementation & Framework© Impact Self-Study Project as an opportunity to look through a window (Taylor & Diamond, 2020) encased with the CPED principles to see the big picture of how our EdD program was, or was not, integrating those principles.

Through sharing this high-level review of our program, we aim to illuminate how doctoral program self-study must move beyond identifying the presence of principles to evaluating the depth and coherence of their integration across the program. In doing so, we contend that self-studies, such as this one, should not simply be documentation of alignment but rather a mechanism for examining the extent to which CPED's six guiding principles are purposefully incorporated and to drive program evaluation and improvement.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative program self-study situated within the broader CPED Principles Implementation & Framework© Impact Self-Study Project, described more fully in the Pape and Perry (2026) article in this same journal. The CPED Guiding Principles Implementation Rubric (CPED, 2024a) was provided to the participating institutions to allow "for self-assessment to determine integration of the CPED Framework©" (CPED, 2024b, p. 1) across multiple levels of program design. Within our program, the self-assessment work functioned as a non-experimental quality-improvement inquiry designed to examine the degree to which CPED guiding principles were integrated into the program and the extent of their impact across our students, faculty, program structures, and professional practice.

Our program-level self-study was conceptually grounded in the CPED Framework©, which emphasizes equity-centered problem solving, application of professional knowledge, collaboration with diverse communities, field-based inquiry into problems of practice, integration of theory and practice through systematic inquiry, and the generation and transformation of professional knowledge. These principles, along with CPED design concepts such as Scholarly Practitioners and Inquiry As Practice, informed both our data interpretation and evaluative judgment. Because our research team consisted of program faculty engaged in examining our own program, the study aligns with traditions of practitioner self-study and collaborative qualitative inquiry.

Setting

This study was conducted within the EdD program at UF, a CPED-affiliated institution located in the midwestern region of the United States. Established in 2013, the program was intentionally redesigned in 2017 around the CPED Framework©, including its definition of the professional doctorate in education, six guiding principles for program design, and associated design concepts. At the time of the current self-study, the program had graduated approximately 100 doctoral candidates since its inception and had

not undergone a formal, comprehensive review of the CPED Framework© integration since its adoption almost ten years prior. Participation in the CPED Principles Implementation & Framework© Impact Self-Study Project provided our program an opportunity to examine CPED Framework© integration after almost a decade of implementation.

Participants

Participants in our program's self-study represented three stakeholder groups within the EdD program: current doctoral students, program alumni, and doctoral faculty. All participants were adults aged 18 years or older. Convenience sampling was used due to the in-person Summer Institute (a three-day face-to-face event satisfying our EdD program's residency requirement), during which many students, alumni, and faculty were already present on campus. In addition, our faculty contributed program artifacts (e.g., syllabi, assessments, and publications) for document analysis, and four faculty members specifically participated in rubric-based interpretation of our self-study's findings along with a graduate research assistant.

Data Sources and Collection

The CPED Principles Implementation & Framework© Impact Self-Study Project directions instructed us to collect appropriate data sources to "understand the degree of integration of the elements of the Framework© and to make an informed [program] rating" (CPED, 2024b, p. 1). Thus, data collection for our UF self-study occurred across four complementary sources to support triangulation: program-level documents ($n = 3$), course syllabi and assessments ($n = 28$), alumni dissertations ($n = 10$), and focus groups transcripts ($n = 4$). Beyond the 45 documents we identified as relevant to a high-level self-study, we also collected an additional 15 optional data sources. These are explained in more detail below.

Program-Level Documents

We analyzed two documents containing program-level student learning outcomes, including the EdD Student Handbook, which identified program objectives, and the EdD Curriculum Map, which contained curricular assessment course mapping that was completed as part of the university's 2023 program curricular assessment. We also analyzed one document containing our program-level policies, including program benchmarks and dissertation requirements. These three documents were included to examine how CPED principles were operationalized in candidate performance expectations and program policies.

Course Syllabi and Assessments

We asked faculty to submit recent course syllabi and course assessments to get a sense of how CPED principles align with course learning objectives and outcomes. While the university has a syllabus template for faculty to follow, the mandatory content focuses on institutional information and policies. In other words, faculty do have purview over what EdD program information may or may not be included. As such, it was important for us to determine if, and how, CPED principles were present within syllabi. Twenty-two of the evidence documents consisted of 16 core courses syllabi (one from each professor of the 14 core courses, two of which have different



professors) and six syllabi from the possible 10 elective courses. As such, we collected over 80% of our program syllabi for analysis.

Embedded Comprehensive Exams (ECEs) are the primary assessments in our UF EdD program. The ECE occurs within the core courses (EDUC 703, 705, 707, 711, 713, and 715). In each of these courses, students complete an assessment that asks them to identify a problem, challenge, or opportunity in their current or future workplace, evaluate this situation considering what they have learned in the program, and use the theoretical and research-based knowledge they have gained to create a comprehensive plan to address that problem, challenge, or opportunity. In other words, as Scholarly Practitioners, students demonstrate their ability to apply the literature to a Problem of Practice. These six key assessments were included to examine how CPED principles were operationalized in course-level expectations for students.

Student Dissertations

As instructed in the CPED Principles Implementation & Framework© Impact Self-Study Project (CPED, 2024b) directions, we collected “five student dissertations at random from the past two graduation cycles (10 total)” (p. 2). Out of an alphabetized list of 16 student dissertations from 2024, the first, second, seventh, eighth, and sixteenth were randomly selected. Out of 13 from 2023, the second, fourth, eighth, twelfth, and thirteenth listed were chosen. The 10 dissertations were analyzed for alignment with CPED principles.

Focus Group Interviews and Transcripts

Four semi-structured focus groups were conducted during our program’s signature Summer Institute. Each session lasted approximately 50 minutes and included mixed stakeholder representation (students, alumni, and faculty). Across the four focus groups, we had 13 participants in total (4 faculty members, 3 alumni, and 6 current students). Focus group one included one faculty member who had served as the program chair previously and was very familiar with CPED and one current student. Focus groups two and three each consisted of a faculty member who had been teaching in the program for three years, 1 alumnus, and 2 current students. Finally, focus group four had a faculty member with six years of teaching experience within the program, one alumnus, and a current student.

Each participant received a CPED Framework© (CPED, 2024b) handout to support discussion of program integration and impact. Discussions explored participants’ awareness of the CPED Framework©, experiences encountering CPED principles in coursework and practice, and the influence of the Framework© on dissertation work and professional activities. Sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed. Each transcript was counted as one required document for the purposes of data analysis for the self-study.

Optional Data Sources

An additional 15 optional data sources were gathered, meaning they were not required by institutions participating in the CPED Principles Implementation & Framework© Impact Self-Study Project but could be included if relevant. These consisted of four faculty publications, eight alumni publications and presentations, and three alumni feedback documents collected from surveys and interviews students completed upon graduating from the program.

Optional data included four publications from three faculty (out of eight), who were asked to share anything they have published that is specifically about the EdD program to look for evidence of integration of CPED principles within our faculty’s research. However, only the names of publications were shared; the full text of the articles were not provided. Therefore, their content was not evaluated beyond the topic of the publications. It should be noted that three of the four publications were from the same two faculty members.

A second optional data source was presentations from alumni. Ten alumni were emailed asking to share any publications or presentations based on their dissertations. We ended up receiving permission to include eight publications/presentations from six alumni who responded. As with the faculty publications, only the names of publications and presentations were shared, and the full text was not provided or analyzed beyond the title and topic of the presentations.

The three alumni feedback documents represent current and alumni feedback. One document contains the responses from 16 alumni (who responded out of approximately 80) when asked three questions to use responses for marketing purposes. The second document was created by AI tools to synthesize the common themes and threads from five exit interviews with 2024 graduates who volunteered to provide feedback on the program and their experience once they graduated. The third document contains EdD program survey comments from 22 students who were current students at the time of data collection. This survey was sent out in January of 2024 to measure students’ perceptions of the integration of CPED’s six principles. Together, these various sources enabled examination of CPED integration across coursework, assessments, dissertations, stakeholder perceptions, and professional dissemination.

Data Analysis

Focus Group Transcript Analysis

A member of the research team with formal training in qualitative research methodology analyzed the focus group interviews using qualitative coding procedures using the research software program MAXQDA. Coding employed a priori categories derived from the six CPED guiding principles, enabling systematic identification of stakeholder statements reflecting each principle within discussions among students, faculty, and alumni. This deductive approach allowed participant perceptions of program design and integration of CPED principles to be examined in direct relation to evidence drawn from program artifacts.

Internal CPED Matrix

Data analysis centered on rubric-guided qualitative evaluation of the CPED Guiding Principles Implementation Rubric. Members of the research team independently reviewed program artifacts and focus group transcripts and documented evidence within a structured CPED matrix that we created and used to map each artifact to relevant CPED guiding principles. For each evidence document, each research team member recorded alignment with each of the CPED principles. The analytic matrix functioned as a systematic audit trail linking individual data sources to program-level interpretation.

Following the independent review, the research team engaged in structured consensus discussions. Through iterative dialogue, the investigators compared interpretations, revisited raw data, and collaboratively constructed shared representations of program integration. Consensus ratings were reached for each CPED principle. This collaborative interpretive process enhanced credibility by incorporating multiple perspectives, supporting triangulation across data sources, and ensuring that conclusions reflected collective agreement grounded in evidence.

Translating to the CPED Integration Rubric

Evidence synthesized across artifacts was then used to determine ratings for each of the six CPED principles using the CPED Guiding Principles Implementation Rubric (CPED, 2024a). This rubric specifies progressive levels of integration according to the proportion of relevant documents and program assessments demonstrating expectations aligned with each principle, ranging from Emerging representation in a minority of sources to Progressing, Full Integration, and finally, to Exemplary integration across nearly all documents and assessments with supporting alumni evidence. To meet Exemplary status, a program needed to have 100% of the relevant documents, more than 75% of program assessments, and alumni data sources demonstrating the integration of each principle.

FINDINGS

The main finding from this self-study was that in utilizing the CPED Guiding Principles Implementation Rubric (CPED, 2024a), our program met Exemplary for all six principles. Specifically, we found that all stakeholders—faculty, students, and alumni—could meaningfully describe the role of CPED principles in shaping coursework and applied learning in the presence of the CPED Framework© (CPED, 2024b) handout. Throughout the four focus groups, stakeholders provided examples of CPED principles. For example, one student recounted how her dissertation study topic related to Principles 1 and 2:

I'm looking at adverse childhood experiences and how to help work through those...so the Principle 1, equity, ethics, and social justice. This is a social justice issue helping all students kind of rise above their background and achieve what their potential is. So, I would say [Principle] 2, making a positive difference in the lives of individuals, families, and organizations. If we can create some of that change, that has a ripple effect and it can change everybody in the school...and the community.

One alumnus explicitly identified Principle 3, providing opportunities for candidates to develop and demonstrate collaboration and communication skills to work with diverse communities and to build partnerships, and said:

Many of the assignments and my dissertation, really, allowed me to collaborate with various stakeholders. You know, whether it was in the community or in the school district or in neighboring school districts. So, I really had to put myself out there and, you know, to get the data or to find out what you know, what's best practices or other things that we should implement, you really have to, you know, collaborate with various stakeholders.

Another student referenced Principle 4, even without explicitly naming it. He said:

I like how the program has helped me think as a practitioner about how to deal with problems...identify the problem, what are other people doing about a problem, and look at some of the research. Okay, now I have some background. So, what's next? What can we do?

One faculty member reflected, "I was looking at the principles mentioned in the Framework©...it looks like a blueprint for how we try to design our coursework." Another faculty member pointed out how alumni and students' examples of smaller projects that they complete in courses "align with that sixth Principle, or generating and using professional knowledge and practice."

As these examples demonstrate, stakeholders consistently spoke to how the CPED principles were integrated into courses and applied within coursework and professional practice. However, our analysis of program documents revealed a second finding: a lack of consistent and explicit use of CPED language, particularly within course syllabi and the Student Handbook. Examining these documents served as a window into the program as a whole (Taylor & Diamond, 2020), allowing us to assess how the principles were conveyed in written communication. Although faculty participating in our program's self-study could readily identify which principles were integrated, the documents themselves lacked explicit references to CPED, the principles, or the Framework©. This suggests that while the program was initially designed with CPED principles in mind, students and faculty joining the program in the interim years may be engaging with CPED's core principles unknowingly. This gap highlighted the need for clearer, more intentional communication about CPED principles in our program with both faculty and students. For example, we determined that each syllabus should include the CPED principles to make their integration visible and explicit. This relatively simple change reflects our program's complexity (Messer et al., 1992) because it demonstrates how a seemingly small curricular artifact, like syllabi, actually operates within a much larger network of organizational values, instructional practices, faculty interpretation, student experiences, and program identity.

The third finding from the self-study was that, despite earning an Exemplary rating on the self-study rubric, we identified several areas needing improvement and more explicit integration of the CPED principles. Principle 1, which focuses on issues of equity and social justice, was identified the least number of times (out of the six principles) in the documents that we analyzed. While some of the course syllabi, core assessments, and student/faculty scholarship engaged with questions of equity and social justice, it was not ubiquitous, and has become a priority for future development. We also recognized that the EdD Curriculum Map reflected a crosswalk of principles based on courses that had been substantially revised over time or taught by new faculty, resulting in a potential erosion of true alignment. These insights illustrate that CPED Guiding Principles Implementation Rubric scores alone do not reveal variations in principle enactment or instructional practice. As with our realization that CPED, its principles, and its Framework© must be intentionally embedded in communication with faculty and students, our self-study process highlighted the need for a structured process for all EdD faculty to discuss the principles collectively—how they understand them, how they integrate them within courses, and how they are enacted across the program. This would, in fact, position faculty as both knowers and learners engaged in systematic, intentional inquiry (LaBoskey, 2004).

These three findings provided our program with a high-level overview of the presence of CPED principles; however, the key



takeaways from the process of self-study are far more tangible and impactful. These two key takeaways are presented next.

Presence of Principles Is Not Proof of Practice

The findings suggest that while the CPED Framework© (CPED, 2024b) handout enabled faculty, students, and alumni to articulate the CPED principles and describe their presence in courses and program structures, the self-study process revealed limitations in how integration was assessed. Our approach counted a principle as fully integrated if it appeared in at least one document, a method aligned with the broader self-study initiative, but ultimately insufficient for us to understand the depth or quality of implementation. The mere presence of a principle, such as a course objective tied to historical scholarship (Principle 5) or theoretical framework selection (Principle 6), did not demonstrate how the principle was enacted in practice. As a result, the process illuminated a gap between identifying principles and evaluating their practical application, highlighting how simply counting occurrences did not lead to engaging in program-wide reflection about what meaningful integration should look like. In fact, counting occurrences focused more on the idea of compliance rather than collective learning to make evidence-based decisions (Baker et al., 2011).

These insights also led to important considerations that have the potential to not just inform our own future self-study efforts, but which could also be of value to other CPED member institutions. If the goal is to assess stakeholders' awareness, understanding, and application of the CPED principles and Framework©, then focus groups should first explore participants' perspectives without introducing the CPED materials. In our study, providing the handout at the beginning of the session and encouraging its use limited our ability to gauge genuine familiarity with the Framework©. This experience highlights the need for more nuanced approaches that differentiate between recognition prompted by provided materials and authentic knowledge gained through program engagement. Future CPED program evaluations should therefore incorporate methods that capture stakeholders' unprompted perceptions alongside document analysis to generate a more accurate picture of the Framework's© integration and impact. In this way, self-study can lead to more reflective inquiry (Berry & Kitchen, 2023; Coia & Taylor, 2009).

Beyond Presence to Purposeful Practice

A second major takeaway from our self-study was the need for greater intentionality in how the program references and operationalizes the CPED Framework© and its principles. Participants' varied awareness of CPED highlighted the importance of making explicit connections in routine program communication and instructional materials. One practical implication is the integration of CPED principles directly into course syllabi, which offers a consistent and transparent way to demonstrate alignment for both faculty and students. The self-study also exposed gaps in how evidence of principle integration, particularly among alumni, was evaluated. With access limited to abstracts or slide decks from the data artifacts we collected, determining how CPED principles informed alumni scholarship proved challenging. Collecting full publications, or at the very least abstracts, would provide a deeper context and allow for more accurate analysis of principle integration.

These findings also point to broader methodological implications for program-level self-studies. If the purpose of the

CPED Guiding Principles Implementation Rubric (CPED, 2024a) is to enable programs to establish a sense of their level of integration of principles in their program, establishing shared definitions of "relevant documents" (CPED, 2024b, p. 2) and developing a consistent approach to document collection are essential for producing reliable, interpretable results. During our participation in the CPED Principles Implementation & Framework© Impact Self-Study Project, in which programs were allowed to define their own data sources, substantial variability emerged in what counted as evidence and how integration was tallied. The use of percentages amplified this issue; a principle appearing once across a small set of documents could yield a misleading conclusion of 100% integration. In our case, identifying each principle at least once in each document category resulted in uniform 100% scores that obscured meaningful differences in depth or quality of integration. This highlights the need for self-study processes that move beyond simple presence-absence metrics, or what Coia and Taylor (2009) describe as a "recipe driven" (p. v) processes, and toward approaches that capture the substance, consistency, and purposefulness of CPED principle implementation.

CONCLUSION

In viewing self-study as an opportunity for doctoral programs to scrutinize their accomplishments, identify areas for growth, and clarify future directions (Baker et al., 2011), this high-level review of our EdD program revealed how tensions can arise between identifying principles as integrated into the program and understanding what meaningful integration actually entails. The process provoked critical questioning of our assumptions about CPED principle integration, disrupting the comfort associated with an Exemplary rating and opening space for a deeper examination. While our findings challenged us to reconsider our program structures, communication practices, and shared understanding of CPED principles, we recognize that program self-study should ultimately be an ongoing process that "provokes, challenges, and illuminates" (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 20). In other words, instead of simply providing a report that documents alignment with CPED principles, future self-study should go beyond identifying the presence of principles to evaluating the depth and coherence of integration across the program. Just as CPED supports the creation of quality, rigorous EdD programs while honoring the local context of each institution, self-study must also remain grounded in context. As such, we support the idea of self-study as an internal process for program assessment rather than a means for comparison across programs.

Moreover, participating in the CPED Principles Implementation & Framework© Impact Self-Study Project allowed the research team to feel more deeply engaged with CPED and to better understand the level of integration that our program has with the CPED principles, even with the inclusion of a traditional five-chapter dissertation. This, in turn, fostered a sense of belonging, connection, and purpose among the faculty on the research team. As such, we increasingly view ourselves as stewards of the profession (Shulman et al., 2006), responsible for ensuring that our program remains coherent, purposeful, and responsive to the needs of Scholarly Practitioners. The self-study process also reinforced our commitment to ongoing reflection and continuous improvement, prompting us to formalize structures for faculty dialogue, shared understanding of the principles, and regular review of program materials. Ultimately, our program self-study not only illuminated areas for growth but also

strengthened our collective identity as a CPED-aligned EdD program and reaffirmed our responsibility to model the inquiry, reflexivity, and innovation we expect of our students.

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