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From Program to Practice: Purpose, Empowerment, and Persistence in Doctoral Education

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From Program to Practice: Purpose, Empowerment, and Persistence in Doctoral Education

A student project from the 2022 Winona State University’s Doctoral Residency Program

Introduction by
A. Brooke Boulton & Joel J. Traver
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Edited by

A. Brooke Boulton & Steven M. Baule

Winona State University, Winona, Minnesota

2023
The essays in this book are selected from doctoral students as part of the 2022 Doctoral Residency course. The residency course is a core portion of the WSU education doctorate program.

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Purpose, Empowerment, and Persistence in a Cohort Model
Doctoral Program

Matt Howard

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Introduction

A. Brooke Boulton & Joel J. Traver

Students who commence a doctoral education program pursue a process of becoming. The practitioner-scholar identity is a self-defining outcome that distinguishes an EdD graduate from a PhD graduate. EdD students begin their doctoral journeys as practitioners: educators and professionals from P-12 and higher education, and beyond, who have years to decades of experience that guides their research interests and purposes for pursuing an EdD. These students progress through intensive academic and research programming that culminates in dissertation writing—rigorous endeavors that teach practitioners new ways of knowing, thinking, and being. Along the way, students negotiate what it means to be a scholar, and emerge from their programs prepared with new skill sets to change the world—which is, after all, what they aspire to do.

Before they go about changing the word, however, EdD students engage in self-reflection to establish a sense of purpose, seek sources of empowerment, and develop strategies to persist, which are a critical trifecta for student success. The essays in this collection represent students from two stages in the doctoral process: those who have just begun and those preparing to graduate. As evident in their essays, students understand that “PEP” is not just a method of sustainability for program success—it can be applied to settings where purpose, empowerment, and persistence may be critical to their professions and to the success of others. While an EdD program is certainly an individual pursuit, the responsibilities that follow becoming a practitioner-scholar are communal. Therefore, this collection represents the many ways students have chosen to define their relationships with
purpose, empowerment, and persistence, from program to practice.

Purpose

For starters, why are we here? It’s an age-old question, and a difficult one to answer. But for EdD students, being able to identify their purpose for pursuing an EdD and recognize how that purpose transfers back into their professional practice is critical for their success. Limited research explores student perspectives on their purposes for pursuing a doctorate, but Åkerlind and McAlpine (2017) and Loxley and Kearns (2018) share similar findings related to the purpose of doctoral study. Some students seek individual development, want to improve their research skills to better serve their institutions, or desire to make valuable contributions to their fields (Åkerlind & McAlpine, 2017). Others seek intellectual validation and recognition or see the doctorate as a means of positionality—a step they need to take to advance their careers (Loxley & Kearns, 2018). Ultimately, many students enter WSU’s program because they want to know more so they can be more, not only for themselves, but because they serve a higher purpose in their fields. They want to see change, and they need the skills to lead that change.

Empowerment

Students who couple their sense of purpose with empowerment are more likely to find success along their doctoral journeys. Empowerment manifests in many forms, and there are many parties responsible for a student finding empowerment and feeling empowered. By exploring empowerment theory, such as through the lens of Perkins and Zimmerman (1995), students may situate empowerment as a collective effort. Perkins and Zimmerman (1995) refer to a model of empowerment that defines ‘‘intrapersonal empowerment’’ (situation-specific individual confidence and competence), ‘‘instrumental empowerment’’
(effective action by the individual via citizen participation), and ‘substantive’ or community or organizational empowerment (effective action by the group)” (p. 575), which all apply to the EdD program and cohort model experience. Program faculty and university stakeholders empower students via socialization and academic literacy, as well as through a good old fashioned “welcome”. From here, students develop a sense of belonging and begin to define their own sources and sense of empowerment—another step in the process of becoming. Empowerment moves students from a place of purpose (I want to be here) to a place of being (I belong here), which aids in their scholarly identity formation.

John Dewey (1916) explained that “The purpose of education is to insure the continuance of education by organizing the powers that insure growth” (p. 51; as cited in Ashcroft, 1987, p. 142). Dewey’s use of “continuance” implies momentum—the desire to push forward and to grow. His statement also implies collective effort, arguing that students, programs, and institutions working together are all mechanisms of progress. EdD students who become practitioner-scholars are the product of this well-functioning machine. Further, empowerment is enabling, efficacy, capability, agency, and freeing (Ashcroft, 1987). The EdD program’s purpose is to produce scholars, but not just on paper. Students who graduate from an EdD program have demonstrated not only their belief in themselves and who they want to become but have acted upon their capabilities. To be empowered is having the power to become, and for EdD students, this reinforces their pursuit to become scholars.

**Persistence**

Drive. Ambition. Status. Pinnacle achievement. Regardless of the impetus for one to pursue a doctoral degree, students must possess exceptional attributes and dispositions in order to earn the distinction of “doctor.” Unwitting students may
assume that mere enrollment in an applied, accelerated program will lead to an earned doctorate. Not true in the slightest notion. Doctoral programs require intense dedication and focus; personal and professional sacrifice; a “no excuses” attitude; and a deep desire to push through the most difficult of situations. Sounds easy, right? Persistence is the element of “PEP” that maintains the fluidity of the trifecta. Students may establish purpose, they may feel empowered, but they must also identify unique persistence strategies beyond knowing they need to “work hard”. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are well-researched facets of doctoral persistence (Chamadia & Quereshi, 2021), but they do not always address specific strategies, such as how a student will overcome personal obstacles related to family, career, and reading and writing. Persistence is the drive, but it is also knowing how to find and use resources, such as faculty mentors, peers, and writing services, which are part of an EdD program’s support system. A successful EdD student will utilize all aspects of purpose, empowerment, and persistence by recognizing that they are not distinguishable. A student’s sense of purpose is a great method to persist, as is feeling empowered. And to achieve one’s purpose and become empowered, one must persist.

The Doctor of Education program at Winona State University is structured as a cohort model: a small group of students progress through the program at the same time. This model is critical for student success and is an important element of “PEP”. A cohort has the power to ease the isolation doctoral students often feel, while offering a collaborative learning community (Fifolt & Breaux, 2018). Though studies are individualized, students participate in a shared experience, one that moves deeper than academic rigor and coursework. Their exchanges of purpose, their abilities to empower each other, and their roles as motivators to persist toward the same goal are foundational to the journeys of many students. Additionally, as students move from program to practice, the networking and
community building they experienced in their program will transfer. As evidenced in the following pages, many students highlight their experiences in a cohort as definitive to their relationship with “PEP”.

In 2022, Winona State University celebrated Purpose, Empowerment, and Persistence as its university theme. This essay collection from current doctoral students invited them to research and explore these concepts relative to their own experiences as novice EdD students or as nearly-minted practitioner-scholars. Many have utilized current, discipline-specific research that challenges traditional views on what it means to earn a doctorate or to become a scholar. Others celebrate identities as women and immigrants, as being neurodiverse, or as being adults with a learning disability. These individualized approaches show just how critical a student’s identity—the many selves they bring with them to doctoral study—and research interests are to their perceptions of purpose, empowerment, and persistence. We are so proud of who you are and of who you will become.

References


Purpose, Empowerment, and Persistence: Elements of the Doctoral Journey

Laura Beasley

There are many exciting changes occurring in higher education that require the knowledge and experience of doctorate-prepared practitioners to help guide and lead new initiatives. Therefore, students in doctoral programs need to be ready to lead in their professions (Sponsler & Wesaw, 2014). To meet high expectations, doctoral students need to learn how to become researchers—a critical component of a student's journey in a doctoral program (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010). Learning how to do research involves a certain amount of identity transformation as students progress through a doctoral program (Mantai, 2015). Learning research and forming new identities can be challenging for many doctoral students. Because of the rigorous nature of doctoral programs, students must find purpose or meaning in their journey to persist and to be empowered to complete the program. "Motivation is often explored through the lens of meaning" (Sverdlik & Hall, 2019, p. 26). When students find a purpose that they are passionate about, it helps to motivate them to persist. Purpose, empowerment, and persistence are all critical elements for success in a doctoral program.

Purpose

For most students in a doctoral program, the purpose of why they enroll can be the foundation of every doctoral student's journey. For some students, their purpose is personal. Others might have a different purpose, such as finding a better career, earning a higher salary, obtaining greater prestige, or building self-worth (Shin et al., 2022). Purpose helps drive motivation, which is a central concept in academic persistence and achievement (Pintrich, 2003). Motivation may be both internal
and external, and what motivates students is different for everyone. As Spaulding et al. (2012) state, “personal motivations are typically associated with achievement, personal goals, enjoying a challenge, and desiring a title” (p. 201).

Motivation and purpose are best utilized when all of a student’s basic needs are met, as indicated by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943). This theory of motivation includes five categories of human needs that dictate an individual's behavior: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). “The needs of humans arrange themselves in hierarchies of prepotency. The appearance of one need usually rests on the prior satisfaction of another” (Maslow, 1943, p. 3). If a student is satisfied with the first need, psychological, she can persist to the next level, safety, and so forth. If a student feels safe and secure, they can focus on establishing relationships and reaching out to others for connection.

When students connect with like-minded and supportive others, this connection can have an insurmountable impact on motivation and purpose and how they achieve them. Bolliger and Halupa (2012) suggest that the most critical factor in student satisfaction is the faculty-to-student interaction, student-to-student interaction, and student to non-teaching staff interaction. These interactions suggest that students must reach out to form such relationships during their doctoral program. Those that do are likely in a good place emotionally and physically and are positioned higher on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Doctoral students with most of their basic needs met and who establish good support systems will likely have the confidence and motivation to succeed in the doctoral program (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

In addition to forming healthy supportive relationships, managing health is also vital in helping students find and pursue
their purpose in doctoral programs. Stress and other health issues can be easily managed if doctoral students have good support systems (Spaulding & Rockinson, 2012). Additionally, health issues can be more manageable if students get plenty of rest, eat healthily, and have a safe environment. An established, meaningful purpose, self-care, and proper support ultimately become sources of empowerment for student persistence in a doctoral program.

Empowerment

Just like purpose has different meanings for different people, so can empowerment. What empowers one person might not be the same for everyone. As defined through empowerment theory according to Perkins & Zimmerman (1995), empowerment can be further divided into empowerment processes and empowerment outcomes. Empowerment processes include working with outside organizations in leadership or with people in leadership positions and in the community. Making broad connections in a doctoral program could be an important element to student persistence, motivation, and success. Additionally, doctoral students may find empowerment outcomes that include gaining knowledge about how to work with outside organizations, networking, and growing organizations within those processes (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995).

In addition to support systems, gaining confidence is also essential for students to feel empowered. As doctoral students gain more knowledge about their purpose through supportive academic settings, they will experience a different level of empowerment, which will help them persist (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Learning about research, talking like a researcher, and having a support system in and outside of the academic setting will help doctoral students gain the confidence they need to achieve success in the program.
Persistence

Though doctoral students will define different needs to help them persist, support, encouragement, and having a goal are often essential to persistence in a doctoral program (Hudson, et al., 2020). Doctoral students who are passionate about their purpose and feel supported and empowered are likely to persist and reach their end goal. Personal support systems, along with support from the academic institution, are significant factors in student persistence (Tinto, 1975). To help with attrition rates, doctoral programs should prioritize helping doctoral students feel supported and foster a sense of belonging. It is also crucial for doctoral programs to continually engage with their students, especially when students are attending institutions in an online format. Online learners can feel isolated, experience challenges keeping up with their studies, and are more likely to disengage (Hwang et al., 2015). Doctoral programs with cohort models are ideal because students can build a support network through their cohorts (Ames et al., 2018).

Support is important and comes in many forms. Some students’ needs are as simple as receiving encouragement and recognition from a supervisor (Mantai, 2017). These small acts of kindness can mean so much and help students persist even on their worst days. Other impactful resources such as peer relationships and social networks (Janta et al., 2014), family, friends, peers, distraction, food (Baker & Latuka, 2010), and writing for publications promote self-efficacy (Dunlap, 2006). It really does take a community to help doctoral students persist in their program of study.

Another factor that helps students persist in their doctoral program is their changing identities. A study by Mantai (2017) found that doctoral students developed into the professionals they aspired to be and felt like actual researchers. Researching, presenting, writing, reading, and attending conferences all help
students feel like researchers, promote growth, and encourage students to realize their true potential.

Conclusion

The key to success for the doctoral student is not linear, and it is multifaceted. There are many barriers and challenges to completion, and depending on the doctoral student’s characteristics, they will likely need different types of support to get through their respective programs. Each doctoral student will have a different journey but foundational to success is having a meaningful purpose, being empowered throughout the journey, and finding the motivation to persist until the end.

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Purpose, Empowerment, Persistence: Elements of Success in a Doctoral Program

Danilo Lj. Bojic

Doctoral students need to consider how purpose, empowerment, and persistence impact their journeys through a doctoral program towards successful completion and entry into the academic or professional world. Each of these significant components meaningfully influences the formation of identity, a sense of “becoming” as well as belonging, the potential for accessibility, personal grit, and individual motivation. Nygaard and Savva (2021) assert that doctoral students have “one foot in the world of practice and another in the world of academe” (pp. 17–18). In such a unique situation, doctoral students face many challenges in their journeys, requiring shifting personal, professional, intellectual, and practical perspectives.

Finding Purpose in an Education Doctorate

    Finding one’s purpose is a challenging experience, no matter the avenue of professional or personal development. Pursuing a doctorate in education (EdD) can be the framework for self-discovery and finding purpose. The primary goal of pursuing an EdD is to develop an individual educational and scholarly identity through a structured journey (Wellington & Sikes, 2006). As part of a cohort experience, doctoral students become capable researchers and practitioners of tomorrow in an academic or professional setting (Loxley & Kearns, 2018). Mantai (2018) stated that “the desire to learn drives personal and professional development in the doctorate” (p. 150). Through transformative development, doctoral students “become” aware of their purpose as they enter the professional field.

    Identity development is the heart of the “becoming” process in educational doctoral studies. As noted by Åkerlind and
McAlpine (2017), with the acceleration of doctoral studies in the desire for timely completion, the pressure on doctoral students has increased, thus having a direct effect on the identity development process. This pressure is strongly linked to the purpose of being a doctoral student by placing the focus of intent on the individual without any national framework of support, unlike in Europe and Australia (Loxley & Kearns, 2018). Distinct layers of identity development are impacted by the process of “becoming”. Through doctoral programs, students develop intellectually and personally as they gain independence, utilize innovation, and develop confidence (Åkerlind & McAlpine, 2017).

Mantai (2017) points out that “developing a researcher identity during the doctoral study is a social undertaking” (p. 636). The social undertaking involves professors, mentors, peers, and colleagues, who support the developing identities of EdD students who are becoming researchers, scholars, and practitioners. Doctoral students develop critical skills that shape them personally and professionally through the process. Wellington and Sikes (2006) assert that students develop and evolve their educational and scholarly identities through a doctoral program. It is important to note that the process is gradual and ever-changing.

Doctoral students evolve from one identity to another as they experience different phases of the program, developing confidence along the way. Studies by Weidman and Stein (2001, 2003) and Gardner (2007, 2008, 2010) showcase that the gradual and phase development of scholarly identity is closely tied to different components of the doctoral program (as cited in Sverdlik & Hall, 2020). As the time to completion accelerates, pressure increases, and doctoral students are challenged to evolve faster, to pass through different “rites of passage” quicker, and to experience accelerated transformation from a learner to a researcher. Identity development that follows the nature of doctoral education—becoming a researcher through
researching—is a fluid and gradual process (Mantai, 2017). The gradual process is closely linked with the sense of confidence, directly increasing as doctoral students transition from acquiring knowledge to contributing to the general pool of knowledge. As Mantai (2018) asserts, a common expectation for doctoral students is to gradually move from initial doctoral identities toward academic and other professional identities. As identity develops, the concept of “becoming” emerges with the sense of belonging (Nygaard & Savva, 2021, p. 12).

Finding purpose and “becoming” is directly linked to the educational journey. Loxley and Kerans (2018) state that the purpose of the educational doctoral journey is to prepare for academic and non-academic careers. Doctoral students perceive purpose in their journey to “becoming” capable researchers in skill and ability aligned with the primary purpose of doctoral studies. The purpose has shifted with the acceleration and repositioning of doctoral studies toward a practitioner framework. Doctoral studies now transform doctoral students into skilled and innovative knowledge workers rather than creators of an original contribution to knowledge (Åkerlind & McAlpine, 2017).

The transformative aspect of the doctoral journey of “becoming” is further illustrated as a career shift or enhancement, supported by the development of professional and work-based doctorates (Loxley & Kearns, 2018). The transformation and the process of “becoming” are not immediate; they are gradual processes allowing for the formation of long-term goals. The personal sense of a larger purpose directly influences achieving long-term goals as part of the educational journey (Hudson et al., 2020). Although the process impacts individual identity, the cohort system provides a communal framework for experiencing, exploring, and supporting. Mantai (2019; as cited in Nygaard & Savva, 2021) argues that belonging in personal, social, and professional communities is critical to “becoming.” The cohort
system enhances the doctoral student’s sense of purpose through the process of “becoming.” According to Nygaard and Savva (2021), the ultimate goal of “becoming” is overcoming all the challenges throughout the doctoral journey and emerging as a transformed individual contributing to a broader pool of knowledge as practitioners.

The Role of Empowerment

Empowerment is essential to navigating the doctoral journey, particularly for foreign nationals pursuing an educational doctorate in the United States. Empowerment challenges influence finding a purpose in pursuing doctoral studies and developing persistence for successful completion. Empowerment deals with the sense of control, taking control over one’s future. As Lahiri-Roy and Belford (2021) highlight, doctoral students need to negotiate empowerment by transforming the Westernized education model. Empowerment through the transformation of the Westernized education model is exhibited by diversifying equitable access, addressing privilege and the impact on finding purpose and successful completion, and conveying the importance of mobility. Mobility may be conveyed through empowerment in such a way that doctoral students gain control and achieve resource mobilization as an essential factor of the educational journey (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Furthermore, Perkins and Zimmerman (1995) suggest that empowerment is generated through a group effort of students in the doctoral program: they share the common interest of achieving the same goal of completing doctoral studies while developing and growing as emerging scholars and practitioners. Perkins and Zimmerman (1995) view empowerment as a “link [to] individual well-being with the larger social and political environment,” creating a responsive community (pp. 569–570).

In a seminal work, Rappaport (1987) asserts that empowerment manifests differently for different people and
communities. Lahiri-Roy and Belford (2021) state how empowering diversification of access is vital for Westernized education and how it transforms doctoral students on their path to completion as well as programs by expanding their value. Educational accessibility paired with inclusivity, without regard to race, national or ethnic origin, gender, sex, cultural, or socio-economic backgrounds, directly facilitates career empowerment for emerging practitioners (Lahiri-Roy & Belford, 2021). Through empowerment, doctoral students gain access and control of their future through the educational journey.

Privilege is closely connected to the accessibility of higher education, in particular doctoral studies. Rappaport (1987) defines privilege as an “empowerment concept [that] provides a useful general guide for developing preventive interventions in which participants feel they have an important stake” (as cited in Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995, p. 576). The loss of “place privilege,” as Chávez (2019) coins it, is a choice-based effect of most doctoral students as “voluntary migrants” (Chawla & Jones, 2015) embarking on the doctoral journey in a new environment with varying levels of unfamiliarity (Lahiri-Roy & Belford, 2021). Another facet of privilege is social support; in the case of international doctoral students trying to overcome several different barriers, practical backing might be a dominating factor (Nygaard, & Savva, 2021).

The Challenges of Persistence

Persistence might be the most challenging factor in a doctoral journey. Challenges of persistence in the doctoral journey are a mixture of individual internal and external motivating factors (Sverdlik & Hall, 2020). Motivation is challenged almost daily, particularly during the prominent transformation phases of the doctoral journey. Internal challenges are usually self-imposed, and the process of overcoming them can be directly linked to the level of confidence that doctoral students develop during the
program. According to Lee (2020), persistence is a measurement of not only students’ but institutional and programmatic success. The success of an individual, the success of the cohort, is also the success of the program.

Persistence requires motivation and confidence; it requires the ability to be able to face different challenges that are internal and external. Doctoral students utilize a mix of internal and external survival strategies to navigate their educational journey and respond to the challenges faced throughout the different phases of the program. Sverdlik and Hall (2020) state that, as part of the “internal survival strategies,” students need to constantly remind themselves that they have the potential and determination to overcome upcoming obstacles and possess the conviction to complete a doctoral degree based on individual scholarly and personal interest. These internal challenges greatly impact both confidence and determination of doctoral students. At the same time, as part of “external survival strategies,” students need to rely on active discourse and presentations with fellow students and faculty while constantly being exposed and engaged in scholarly activities through research, reading, writing, and revising (Sverdlik & Hall, 2020).

External challenges are also connected with social factors, in which case the cohort system may provide a level of support enhancing the persistence of individual students. Hudson et al. (2020) aligned persistence with a mixture of individual factors paired with institutional and community-related factors. The personal sense of a larger purpose directly influences persisting toward the ultimate personal goal of the doctoral journey (Hudson et al., 2020). Internally, grit and motivation play a crucial role in doctoral students’ persistence toward the end goal of their doctoral journey. Doctoral students utilize personal grit and motivation strategies to persist in the way of facing different challenges, demands, and responsibilities as connected to the various stages
of individual development in the doctoral program (Sverdlik & Hall, 2020).

Personal grit and motivation strategies are critical to success because of complex sets of pressures and challenges on both personal and professional levels, which affect motivation throughout the doctoral journey (Mujtaba et al., 2007). Grit is fluid and may differ depending on the stage of the doctoral journey; it combines different characteristics from identity and influencing factors, internal and external. Hudson et al. (2020) defines grit as “the combination of passion and perseverance to accomplish long-term goals” (p. 707). In a way, grit is the fuel that pushes doctoral students to advance in their educational journey toward success and completion. Hudson et al. (2020) claim that the level of personal grit is directly connected to the level of individual success of doctoral students in their educational journey. Personal interest, passion for the field of study or topic of research, and individual connection are essential factors in maintaining personal grit and pushing harder and longer toward goals and completion (Hudson et al., 2020). Grit leads doctoral students to develop higher levels of confidence and courage during their educational journey. Confidence is essential in taking responsibility for individual success and development (Pueschel & Tucker, 2018; as cited in Hudson et al., 2020). Grit, confidence, and courage are all connected and play essential roles in students’ persistence throughout their doctoral journey.

Persistence is students’ determination to continue toward successful completion of their doctoral education journey (Lee, 2020; Lim, 2019). Motivation is often cited as a leading factor in a student’s persistence in the doctoral journey as it is influenced by a mixture of internal and external factors ranging from the interest in the field and desire to make a change in life to family support and professional socialization (Sverdlik & Hall, 2020). Such a transformative experience requires dedication driven by
constant motivation through different phases of the doctoral program. Having in mind that self-motivation is a crucial challenging factor in persistence, Gardner (2009) and Weidman et al. (2001) even state that self-motivation is “an explicit requirement in becoming an independent scholar and producer of original knowledge,” thus making motivation a critical factor of success in the doctoral journey, especially preserving in the later and final stages of the program (as cited in Sverdlik & Hall, 2020, p. 101).

Conclusion

By understanding the purpose of the educational doctorate, the roles of empowerment, and the challenges of persistence, doctoral students may complete their educational journey and enter the academic or professional world. As Lee et al. (2020) assert, the success of doctoral students goes beyond completing the educational journey and earning a degree and a title. Success combines the developed knowledge and skills, ability to think critically and creatively, formation of a new identity, “becoming” and belonging to a broader new community, practicing and promoting accessibility, understanding and accepting privilege, becoming mobile and flexible, maximizing personal grit and individual motivation supported by old and new internal and external factors (Lee et al., 2020). The doctoral journey shifts doctoral students’ personal, professional, intellectual, and practical perspectives, creating independent critical thinkers ready to contribute to the world and communities around them (Nygaard & Savva, 2021). The doctoral journey towards success is a transformative one.

References


Purpose, Empowerment, and Persistence: The Trifecta of Doctoral Student Success

Sadie Gunnink

Purpose, empowerment, and persistence play a significant role in a doctoral student’s journey. Doctoral programs are rigorous and require a level of dedication that few people possess. In fact, the total number of people in the United States that are reported to have earned a doctorate is only 1.4% of the population, or 4.5 million people (United States Census Bureau, 2019). Further, the cumulative completion rate for students enrolled in doctoral programs in social sciences was only 2.9% by year three, 19.6% by year six, and 55.7% by year ten (Jaschik, 2007). These statistics show how difficult it is to complete a doctorate. Concepts of purpose, empowerment, and persistence, however, may positively influence success for some students.

Purpose

Purpose, defined as, “an intended or desired result; end; aim; goal” (Random House, Inc., 2022) is where the doctoral student’s journey begins. Many doctoral students enter a doctoral program with a general idea or theory they want to study or a process they would like to see improved. Sometimes, students pursue a doctorate because they want to maintain their current job and earning a doctoral degree is required. Nelson (2020) lists three reasons why people would pursue a doctorate in education: fulfilling an internal yearning, responding to a desire to lead, and accessing career advancement opportunities.

Sharma and Yukhymenko-Lescroart (2022) used the Revised Sense of Purpose Scale (SOPS-2) to assess three dimensions of a student’s purpose: awareness of purpose, awakening to purpose, and altruistic purpose. While many people may have an idea of what they want to do with their lives and
already have an awareness of their life’s purpose, many doctoral students become aware, or awaken to their purpose, through their doctoral studies. Awakening to their purpose is a clear driver of their future success. Sharma et al. (2022) found that awakening to purpose, as opposed to awareness of purpose, emerged as a positive predictor of both resilience and persistence, which doctoral students need.

Most doctoral students start their doctoral programs with a general sense of what they want to study or improve, so narrowing their topic of focus and awakening to their deliberate purpose gives the student a clear direction and end goal to achieve. According to Leider (2015) only certain kinds of purpose have the potential of being empowering. This means doctoral students must choose their deliberate purpose wisely because the topic of their purpose will be something they study for years to come. Finding, maintaining, and focusing on a deliberate purpose is essential for doctoral students’ ability to see their doctoral program through to completion.

**Empowerment**

For a doctoral student, empowerment comes in the form of being supported to research a specific topic and then act on their findings in some way. This empowerment comes from several different places or people throughout the stages of the program and research process. Throughout the doctoral journey, students need to feel they are able to take autonomous action to make a difference. One of the earliest stages where empowerment is critical is during the admissions process. During this process, program faculty decide whether the candidate and their research interests are a good fit for the doctoral program, which essentially allows, or empowers, the student to progress with their purpose.

Once accepted, the relationship between the doctoral student and the supervising professor becomes the next pivotal
stage. Van Rooij et al. (2019) found doctoral students’ success to be directly linked to the ‘match’ between the student and their supervising professor both personally and academically. If the student’s studies are related to the supervising professor’s research, they are empowered in their own research because of the connection and relationship they form. Doctoral students also work with a committee and advisory group. While the student may have opinions on how to do their research, from methodologies to data collection, sometimes they may be limited to what their advising committee and committee chair can offer them in regards of helping the student develop their self-efficacy in the subject area they want to study and research.

Another relationship that will have just as much impact on the doctoral student’s success based on a level of empowerment is the relationship the student has with their employer. Many students specifically enrolled in an EdD program are education practitioners and work directly in schools of different grade levels. To implement any changes in their work environment, they need to feel empowered, supported, and enabled by their supervisor(s) and administrator(s) to implement those changes. Balyer et al. (2017) found that administrators empowered their teachers through various methods; however, administrators did not adequately support teachers’ personal development or their autonomy. Doctoral students need to be aware of this in particular because the frustration that stems from this situation can inadvertently lower their morale, decrease their productivity, and cause burn out, which is something to avoid if they are to be successful in completing their doctoral program.

**Persistence**

If doctoral students are empowered to study their desired topic, get the support they need, and persist to completion, they will be seen as an expert in their field and sought out for their advice. For some students, this realization is very motivating. Van
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Rooij et al. (2019), however, maintains that persistence is not an easy feat. Doctoral programs, by nature, are challenging at best, so a certain level of personal grit is needed. Grit, as defined by Duckworth et al. (2007), is passion and persistence for long-term goals. If a student isn’t passionate about their topic of study, it will be that much harder to work through the obstacles. When someone is passionate about their topic, they are more likely to try harder, persist their way through the obstacle because they have a burning desire or passion to do so.

When doctoral students are struggling, and their persistence is wavering, another place they can look for motivational strategies is from well-known business coach Brian Tracy. While Tracy’s books are typically business-related topics, the skills he talks about are transferrable to academia. In his book, *Eat That Frog!: 21 Great Ways to Stop Procrastinating and Get More Done in Less Time* (2017) Tracy covers 21 different strategies to be more productive. The concept of his suggestions is to focus on the most important tasks of the day. When they are feeling stuck or paralyzed with indecision, doctoral students can ask themselves, “What is the one thing I can do today that will have the most impact?” The answer will help guide them on what they should be focusing on and let the rest go until the important tasks are done.

Tracy’s work and focus is on prioritization, but there are other methods to help doctoral students persist and stay motivated. John Rampton (2017) offers tips that can easily be adopted by students, such as having rituals, not getting bogged down with perfectionism, and making use of technology. Another method as explored by Kris Powers (2018) is setting goals with milestones. Powers (2018) emulates Tracy’s trick of “eating the frog”, and not allowing negative self-talk. Both articles are very good reads for students that want to learn more about ways to become more effective as students and try to mitigate burnout and the other
factors that lead to doctoral student attrition. Either way, it is essential for doctoral students to understand they will need to nurture their persistence and set themselves up with positive coping mechanisms so they are better equipped for the challenges they will face.

Conclusion

Everything starts with a purpose. Doctoral students will need to remind themselves many times throughout their journey why they are pursuing their doctoral degree. If the student has chosen a topic they are truly passionate about, if they feel empowered and supported to make a difference with their findings, and if they are not afraid to work tirelessly to overcome the many obstacles they will face and persevere, then they have found the trifecta of doctoral student success leading them to the finish line: purpose, empowerment, and persistence.

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Keys to Doctoral Program Success

Ixchell L. Tolentino

The idea of a terminal degree and becoming an expert in a field is exciting, but such a pursuit requires ambition. The pursuit of a doctorate, therefore, is not for the faint of heart. Time, finances, personal sacrifices, family obligations, and professional duties all compete throughout the journey. Once doctoral students begin, they will encounter challenges that test their commitment, so they must establish tried and true strategies to achieve success. Being clear on the purpose of pursuit, feeling empowered to make changes, and maintaining persistence throughout the journey are keys to doctoral program success.

Purpose

Each stage of the doctoral experience challenges students to develop their identities as they become writers, researchers, scholars, and practitioners. Developing into these roles, however, requires an adjustment period that comprises both an individual and social dimension, which impact identity and fitting in (Nygaard & Savva, 2021). By living with purpose, the complexities of maintaining multiple roles can be strengthened by goals, self-reflection, and professional growth.

Identifying targeted goals keeps doctoral students on track for program completion. Some of these goals include publishing, becoming an effective communicator and excellent researcher, as well as sharpening critical thinking skills. Loxley and Kearns (2018) write “what is learnt during their doctoral studies are a gamut of skills (and cognate knowledge), which are not only marketable, but also capable of renewal, adaptation and where necessary, replacement” (p. 830). These skills included communication, project planning, social networking, collaboration, critical thinking, and entrepreneurialism. Setting
goals that align with the development of such skills supports the underlying benefits of doctoral pursuit.

In addition to goal setting, relying on self-reflection throughout the program prepares doctoral students to have open minds. Open mindsets are necessary to handle any associated fears or worries. For example, when becoming academic writers, students must be open to critique during the revision and editing process. Reflecting on writing with constructive feedback is essential to becoming stronger academic writers, which is just one examples of how self-reflection is key to processing the different roles doctoral students assume along the journey.

Along with self-reflection, doctoral students aim to grow professionally, and a professional doctoral program, such as an EdD, has different implications from traditional PhD programs. These implications include the provision of research skills, which improve professional practice and result in work-based learning (Banerjee & Morley, 2013). Work-based learning keeps doctoral students engaged in the process of identifying real problems and connecting research to solve them. This process supports the continued professional growth of doctoral students, which aligns with their purpose.

**Empowerment**

To influence positive changes in an organization or society is empowering and purposeful. Doctoral learning, for example, may empower students to engage in discourse that marges research and professional practice, which may have organizational and societal benefits (Lundgren-Resenterra & Kahn, 2019). To be empowered as changemakers, doctoral students must understand and leverage empowerment in order to implement positive changes and influence professional communities.
Feeling empowered is to understand power in its different forms. Doctoral students who want to affect changes in an organization should understand the intricacies of power dynamics. For example, if a doctoral student is a classroom teacher, that teacher has power over students and can create powerful learning experiences. However, that same teacher does not have much power in administrative policymaking. Pursuing a professional doctorate while working with administration on an identified problem of practice gives that teacher/doctoral student the power to advise on concerns and implement organizational changes. Utilizing knowledge and confidence gained in a doctoral program fosters the empowerment it takes to build such relationships and make changes.

K-12 doctoral students, for example, who seek to solve problems within their organizations must collaborate and align with school leadership, as well as to the mission and vision of the school. When administration empowers teachers with the right balance of support, they not only model the kind of empowering interactions children need to see but they also build the influence of teachers’ leadership (Berg & Weymer, 2020). Given the power to lead organizational change is empowering for doctoral students who are serving in schools with this type of power release model.

In addition to implementing changes, building professional relationships is integral to empowerment. When K-12 doctoral students collaborate with their colleagues on shared concerns within their organization, they also create social relationships (Lundgren-Resenterra & Kahn, 2019). These relationships serve as a foundation of support, since doctoral students cannot implement changes on their own. Establishing camaraderie and buy-in to the doctoral students’ purpose makes the journey worthwhile and less isolating.
Persistence

When difficulties already arise early in the stages of doctoral programs, it is only indicative of what is to come as students persist to completion. The doctoral journey is stressful and may be a source of high anxiety. Kamler and Thompson (2008) identify judgement by experts, challenges with valuable knowledge contributions, writing with authority, assertiveness, and a sense of becoming and belonging among the issues and anxieties doctoral students experience. Completion of the doctoral program, therefore, requires a balancing act of executive functioning skills, grit, and connectedness.

Strengthening executive functioning (EF) skills plays an important part in doctoral studies. Used also to manage life, EF skills include paying attention, organizing, planning, prioritizing, starting tasks and staying focused on them to completion, understanding different points of view, regulating emotions, and self-monitoring (Belsky, 2022). Specifically, one of the EF skills identified as an area of great importance in doctoral studies is time management. Finding the balance between doctoral work and life is particularly challenging for mature students (Lim et al., 2019). The challenge is in part due to the established routines of family and work lives. Doctoral students should begin to plan what hobbies they will set aside and what new habits (better sleep, exercise schedules, eating plans, etc.) can make their work more efficient. Persistence to the doctoral program will necessitate strengthening EF skills and advocating for support in any of the less-developed skills.

Along with strengthening EF skills, doctoral students will need to build their grit when feeling challenged in their motivation. Grit can be fostered intrinsically given purpose or fostered extrinsically by the dissertation team/committee. Duckworth (2016) suggests that students who find passion in their curricular path, and who are supported along that path my program
administration, may develop the grit they need to complete their programs (as cited by Hudson, 2020). When times get tough and life gets in the way, doctoral students will have to rely on their grit to maintain their efforts to persist in their programs.

Not only is grit important to persistence but so is being connected. De Clerq et al. (2019) write, “In the domain of doctorates, social support is also depicted as an important determinant of student persistence and degree completion” (p. 102). For example doctoral programs that offer in-person residencies provide a chance for doctoral students to come together as a cohort. Together, the cohort will establish a foundation of support when it comes to all aspects of the doctoral program. Clarifying assignments, sharing research articles, giving and getting moral support, and being and feeling connected, all encourage doctoral students to persist because they know they are not alone and truly supported by like-minded peers.

While a cohort provides informal connectedness, establishing formal relationships with faculty is key to persistence as well. DeClerq et al. (2019) write “central to persistence is faculty's instrumental help” such as through coaching, critical feedback, and productivity, “psychosocial help” such as counseling, role modeling, and empathizing, and “networking assistance” (p. 107). Without these strong formal relationships, feelings of isolation and attrition may become real outcomes for doctoral students.

Conclusion

The journey of doctoral students encompasses mind, body, and soul. What starts as dreams to become experts in their fields is fueled by purpose. Purpose is informed by identified goals, the ability to reflect on each step of the journey, and professional growth. To understand power dynamics, build alliances, and ultimately bring about change and solutions to
organizations and society is powerful and empowering. The journey continues with persistence. Strengthening EF skills to stay on track, having grit when the journey becomes bumpy, and feeling connected to a support group are essential. Overall, when doctoral students utilize the identified keys of purpose, empowerment, and persistence, their journey to achieving their doctoral dreams can and will come true.

References


A Librarian’s Persistence along a Doctoral Journey

Heather Biedermann

Doctoral programs are gaining interest from academic librarians; however, in the past twenty years there has been heated discussions about the need for librarians with doctoral degrees, and what those degrees should be in. These feelings were explored in a subreddit group for Librarians on April 2022. The original post author archlib1996 asked the group, “Does anyone here have a Ph.D. in Library Science? […] I know that a Ph.D. is sometimes not required,” (Thoughts on a Ph.D. in Library Science, 2022). The responses ranged from one by user pocketpupa3 who said, “Don't waste your time. MLIS is considered the terminal degree. If you want to be a dean get your PhD in higher ed, but remember that in this field, education is worthless without job experience,” (Thoughts on a Ph.D. in Library Science, 2022). However, the conversation came back to an EdD option, and archlib1996 asked, “Funny that you mentioned it because I am considering an EdD in Higher Ed as an option, too. I've gone back and forth in my head about it. The university I work for offers a program in that,” to which pocketpupa3 answered, “Definitely get the Ed.D! It's so much more transferable,” (Thoughts on a Ph.D. in Library Science, 2022).

Later in the Reddit conversation, a Reddit user named tjowens talked about their own doctorate and shed light on the usefulness of the degree:

As someone who has a Ph.D (in education not library science) […] here are some thoughts. As others have suggested, a Ph.D is not a requirement for being a dean of a library. Many in those roles don’t have the degree. […] That said, it is a huge amount of work and cost for something that is ultimately not totally necessary. With that said, if you are really interested in the role that
research methods can play in helping explore issues in the field, and you want to make participating in the researcher community of practice related to the future of libraries, a Ph.D is super useful. [...] All that is to say that if the main reason you are considering doing a Ph.D is for job advancement I don’t think it’s worth it. It’s not essential, it’s expensive, and it’s a huge time commitment. If, however, you really want to up your game in doing research and want to spend a lot of your career contributing to the researcher community of practice in the field, and you have the resources and support to do it, I think it can be totally worth it, (Thoughts on a Ph.D. in Library Science, 2022).

The opinions of the Reddit librarians are common, with some saying the terminal degree is enough, yet many more suggest that a doctorate can help those who want positions as directors, deans, and academic librarians at research universities. One renowned librarian, Randi L. Ashton-Pitting, who holds an EdD in Educational Leadership from the University of Hartford, shared that she was treated as less of an academic before she finished her doctoral degree.

As a female library director in higher education, I wasn’t seen as an equal until I completed the Ed.D. The year I held the position as an interim director, I was not seen as an equal with the faculty; it shows you how important the terminal degree is to them (Rider, 2020).

Acquiring a doctorate degree in education or library science has many benefits to librarians hoping to grow in their careers. According to Hoffman (2011), a doctorate encourages practitioners to develop advanced knowledge and skills, provides unique experiences, and offers socialization opportunities related to teaching and research. A doctoral also helps students understand how to empathize with graduate students and offers
insight for faculty needs (Hoffman, 2011). The librarian voices of the internet show that while there may not always be a need for every librarian to have a doctorate, those who do improve the perception of professionalization of the librarian and foster respect of faculty on college and university campuses.

Motivation as to why a librarian would want to pursue a doctorate degree is an important factor in successful completion of many library and information science related degrees (Hands, 2020). In Hands’ (2020) study, the librarian doctoral students were asked about motivation and its source. Some students had external motivations, such as career aspirations, and some had internal motivation, such as gaining expertise in their subject area (Hands, 2020). This author believes that with a doctoral degree such as the EdD, a librarian can achieve a greater purpose of becoming scholars who put their knowledge and leadership in the scope of education into practice.

Doctoral persistence is the continuation of a student's progress toward finishing a degree, (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Having the persistence to finish a doctoral degree is vital to everyone involved in the journey. One potential key to librarian student persistence is having a mentor within the program who helps the student on the path toward success (Sugimoto, 2012). Having advisors or mentors, such as faculty advisors, dissertation chairs, program faculty, and doctoral peers, all positively benefit students in a cohort (Sugimoto, 2012). In the Winona State University’s (WSU) EdD program, the author has experienced mentorship from faculty, program directors, and even other classmates. All of these people have helped support the current success of the author, however, it is clear the entire student cohort succeeding because of ongoing relationships and the benefits they bring.

Any student in a doctoral program should carefully evaluate why they are joining a doctoral program before they even
start. According to Starr (2011), career growth, a pathway toward teaching or administration, isolation from family, and even how interested a student is in a research topic can make or break a student’s success in a program. Starr (2011), a holds a PhD and works as an academic librarian, felt that the doctoral degree was worth it for librarians who are motivated and fully aware of their own motivations for sticking with it. Empowerment, or confidence in the ability to complete the program, is a very personal journey for each doctoral candidate. This is why in the journey toward doctoral program success requires an understanding of the student’s own purpose, clear vision on what the plan is, and empowerment to take the reigns of their own educational plan.

Cohorts along with mentors (both teaching and classmates) give students the support they need academically and socially. Relationships are core to the success of doctoral programs and their students. Many students may not succeed if they don’t have a strong belief in why they are a part of the program, but even more may leave if the cohort and/or mentor support system is not utilized. Planning all parts of the doctoral program to support resiliency is a proven method to ensure success of the student.

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Developing Information Literacy in Self and Students through Purpose, Persistence, and Empowerment

Patrick W. Leeport

Purpose, persistence, and empowerment are valuable traits for practitioner-scholars, as well as learners and engaged citizens. By defining and building their own purpose, persistence, and empowerment, academic librarians are better equipped to help students understand and leverage these important traits. The skills and knowledge academic librarians teach students are aggregated into the term information literacy. Information literacy is defined by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL, 2016) as “the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning.” Discovering information, understanding the information landscape, and creating new knowledge requires purpose, persistence, and empowerment. Teaching these skills to students and patrons is central to the work of an academic librarian. The pursuit of a doctoral degree, while rarely requisite for work in the field of academic librarianship, develops and models purpose, empowerment, and persistence.

Purpose and Discovery

Discovery is one of the most important aspects of information literacy. Information first needs to be discovered before it can be evaluated or synthesized. One aspect that makes discovery “reflective” is examining the purpose behind seeking out information. Several models of information seeking behavior, including Kuhlthau’s (2004) “information search process” suggest information seekers first identify and clarify an information need. While it may seem obvious, every search for information is undertaken with purpose. That information need may initially be
unclear, but through continued searching, thinking, and connecting, the information seeker gains a clearer understanding of their purpose.

Defining and thinking critically about the purpose behind information seeking has never been more important. Misinformation and disinformation have been widely publicized concerns, especially with hot button issues such as vaccine research and election fraud. Fister (2021) articulates that the call to “research it yourself” has led many people to conspiracy theories adrift on the internet. If one looks hard enough to find information on how vaccines cause autism or evidence that the world is flat, undoubtedly they will come across material confirming those assumptions. Confirmation bias, or intentionally seeking information that confirms ones previously held beliefs (Fister, 2021), is especially concerning when so much incorrect or intentionally misleading information is available online. As practitioners and scholars, librarians are positioned to help students consider their bias when approaching an information need. During research consultations or classroom instruction, librarians can help students look for multiple perspectives, encourage thorough evaluation of information, and make decisions or arguments based on credible information.

A doctoral program, to a more specific degree, forces students to reconsider their bias. A tangible example of this is through the development of research questions. Dissertation research questions are highly specific, well-defined statements of information needs. When creating a dissertation proposal, students often draft and redraft research questions to bring clarity to the purpose of their research. There are many common pitfalls for research questions, including assuming an answer to the question before research has already taken place. Mertler (2022) gives an example of a biased research question: “To what extent will use of iPads improve students’ attitudes toward learning
social studies?” While intuitively it may be easy to assume that iPads will improve student attitudes, through this question, the hypothetical researcher has stated their purpose already: they are setting out to prove their predispositions (Mertler, 2022). Much like the person setting out to find information confirming that the world is flat, the researcher in this hypothetical situation is looking to find information confirming what they already believe to be true. A doctoral program can build a strong foundation of unbiased information seeking in practitioner-scholars.

By developing as scholars and contributing to the literature they routinely work within, academic librarians can better understand and articulate to students the need for unbiased and specific purpose when seeking information. “Reflective discovery” is a major component of information literacy (ACRL, 2016). Librarians can leverage skills and knowledge gained through further education to encourage students to be critical and reflective of the purpose behind an information need.

**Persistence and Value**

Persistence is a term used in a variety of ways in higher education research, ranging from the general disposition of a student to work through adversity to a more formal definition as the reciprocal of attrition rates of students seeking a degree. Library literature explores both the persistence within students (Michaels & Cohen, 2018) and the role of the library in the persistence of students towards a degree (Wright, 2021). Parallel research exists exploring the different factors relating to persistence in online doctoral programs (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016). Persistence is integral to achieve success in both the role of a practitioner-scholar and as a student in a doctoral program.

Persistence relates to information literacy by considering the need to understand how information is produced and valued
(ACRL, 2016). Entering college, students have varying degrees of research and writing experience, but those skills are expected prerequisites of upper-level courses (Wright, 2021). Students entering college may not have a strong understanding of the types of information they are expected to value and, in turn, produce. Understanding concepts like peer-reviewed journal articles and why academia values certain types of information over others can be alien to incoming students. Not understanding how and why academic discourse communities work creates obstacles for student persistence both as an internal trait and as a measure of academic retention (Wright, 2021). While controlling for other factors, Wright (2021) found that there is a small, but statistically significant positive correlation between first-year students having a library instruction session and their retention at the university.

The labor involved in understanding the rules and norms before entering a discourse community can be invisible and arduous work. Better equipping students with an understanding of what information is valued in academic settings will offer a smoother transition to partaking in academic conversations. Having examples of how academics communicate information yields easier persistence as students shift some of the focus from the process of communicating to the content of the information they produce.

Similarly, doctoral students are expected to gain a more by understanding their discourse communities and what information is produced and valued in their academic discipline. A doctoral dissertation is an opportunity to demonstrate burgeoning expertise in a field, which requires persistence. Doctoral students have to persist through heightened expectations while, “getting used to new library routines, discovering where to go to meet other students and learning how to find information” (Nygaard & Savva, 2021). Like undergraduate students needing to understand the expectations of their new information needs
through library instruction, doctoral students need to persist by acclimating to their new, often difficult-to-navigate, expectations. By going through the process of more thoroughly learning academic norms themselves, librarian scholars can empathize with and help students understand how and why certain information is valued in different contexts.

**Empowerment and New Knowledge**

In 2015, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) adopted a new *Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education*, replacing the older *Standards for Information Literacy in Higher Education*. The new Framework recognizes undergraduate students as having a “greater role and responsibility in creating new knowledge” (ACRL, 2016). At present, the Framework encourages librarians and students to see scholarship as a conversation and suggests that “Learners who are developing their information literate abilities contribute to scholarly conversation at an appropriate level” (ACRL, 2016). While the Framework encourages students to contribute new knowledge librarians and other practitioner-scholars are in a position to empower them to do so.

To build new knowledge, undergraduate students need to have the confidence and self-efficacy in their information literacy skills. Self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982) speaks to an individual’s own perception of their ability to carry out different tasks. Having high self-efficacy in information literacy gives students the comfort and confidence to be able to find, evaluate, and synthesize information, prior to creating and distributing new knowledge. In a study of Honors students completing their senior thesis, researchers found that students who felt more confident in completing their final projects had higher self-efficacy in their information literacy skills (Medaille et al., 2021). Students using a familiar search tool, proven strategies for selecting quality resources, finding and using key sources, leveraging cited
references, having a plan for organizing content, using relevant keywords, and locating germinal sources all led to higher confidence in being able to complete the largest project of their undergraduate experience (Medaille et al., 2021). To be empowered to create new knowledge-building confidence, comfort, and self-efficacy in information literacy skills is an important step.

Having information literacy skills alone does not guarantee success when seeking information and creating new knowledge, however. Students also need the confidence to act on the knowledge and skills that comprise information literacy (Clark, 2017). In a review of the literature, Clark (2017) cites studies that demonstrate how library instruction can increase self-efficacy, how self-efficacy and ability to perform information literacy skills are linked, and how searchers interact differently with search systems based on their self-efficacy. As practitioner-scholars, academic librarians are well-positioned to help empower students by building up both their information literacy skills and knowledge, as well as the comfort and confidence in using those skills.

Opportunities to become empowered to create new knowledge are more formal and apparent for graduate students. The entire process of doctoral work culminates in the production of a research project focused on filling a gap in the literature. Doctoral students need to demonstrate not just competency, but expertise in their information literacy skills. In comparison to undergraduate work, where students might find and review some of the major sources, doctoral students are expected to be comprehensive in their literature review. In order to receive their degree, doctoral candidates, by virtue of completing their dissertation, must be empowered and ready to contribute new knowledge. By having been through the process of creating new knowledge in a very specific and rigorous way, academic
librarians and other practitioner-scholars are better equipped to empower others to join scholarly conversations.

Conclusion

Purpose, persistence, and empowerment are lifelong traits students develop and utilize throughout their doctoral student experience. As doctoral students assume their roles as practitioner-scholars, those traits can be modelled and shared with those they work with. In the case of academic librarians, purpose, persistence, and empowerment can be directly tied to the work they do in teaching information literacy. Doctoral students, having been empowered through the process of creating and disseminating new knowledge in a specialized and specific way, are prepared to empower others to create new knowledge as well. Academic librarians can build both the information literacy skills and the self-efficacy in themselves and in the students they teach to achieve scholarly pursuits.

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Permanence and Persistence in a Doctoral Program

Martha G. Haugerud

Teachers from various educational levels engage in continuous professional development, and some even decide to keep cultivating their educational growth. A doctoral degree is one of the highest educational achievements and an appropriate choice for an educational practitioner. The choice to pursue a Doctorate in Education may arise because a practitioner has the desire to develop additional skills to assume a different vocation within the field of education.

Doctoral students certainly desire to complete their studies, but on their journeys, they encounter challenges that may hinder their progress. Some postgraduate programs recognize the need to know more about incoming students, their expectations, their interests and motivations, as well as their problems and needs, in order to assist them in successfully completing their goals (Chain, 1995; Reyes, 2006; Sánchez, 2006). An analysis of different factors that doctoral students face while on the path to obtaining a degree, along with their connection to purpose, empowerment, and persistence, is important to understanding the EdD experience for many students.

Identity

Identity is complex. People build their identities through the combination of individual and social factors such as language, culture, and critical thinking. Discourses, opinions, behaviors, and perspectives individuals are exposed co-shape identities (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2003; Hacking, 2000). When entering a doctoral program, doctoral students must have a deep knowledge of their identities, because that insight will help them progress and succeed in the program.
Hopwood (2010) noted that “the current literature tends to focus on relationships grounded in encounters that take place during doctoral study, only incidentally acknowledging those that may predate the doctoral experience in references to the role of friends and family” (p. 107). However, the construction of identity is a continuous process—it does not end at a certain moment, since human beings are in direct contact with the community. The process of identity construction, therefore, generates social and personal changes that lead to adding more elements to that personal identity.

Thus, doctoral students should connect with their identities to be able to recognize their purpose on their doctoral pathway (Trafford, 2008). Establishing this interrelation would assist doctoral students in forging links between concepts and ideas and finally engaging new knowledge with their identities. As a consequence, an EdD student that identifies the self within their research will have more opportunity to conclude the journey because their identity will be evident through their motivation (Wellington & Sikes, 2006).

**Purpose**

Motivation is linked to the educational process in various ways. It is essential to keep a clear and direct purpose in mind when pursuing a doctoral degree, and each doctoral student has a unique motivation in deciding to earn a terminal degree (Hands, 2018). Some students manifest personal reasons, such as desire of satisfying personal goals (Lynch et al., 2018). Other reasons correspond to external factors such as professional goals, salary increase, or new positions (Templeton, 2016).

A doctoral program offers the opportunity to achieve the highest educational level. Several factors can influence positive or negative experiences during the process. Many studies disclosed high numbers of doctoral students who consider leaving their
doctoral program. Anttila et al. (2015) found that 56% of doctoral students contemplated the possibility of not concluding their doctoral process and reported factors of stress, anxiety, exhaustion, and lack of interest. Not knowing the purpose of why they are participating in a doctorate can create confusion in students, and that confusion can cause demotivation, and ultimately, withdrawal.

Individuals can help each other build their knowledge, and in a doctoral program, the cohort model is the perfect way to help students learn through supporting each other (Ferry, 1990 and 1997; Filloux, 1996; Honoré, 1980; as cited by Rincón 2017). The cohort model makes sure members achieve their personal and professional goals, maintain their motivation, and conclude the program. Establishing a clear purpose will allow the doctoral student to focus on the research topic and initiate the creation of a follow-up plan to organize the ideas that arise.

Preparing for the doctoral pathway, students must know if the program will satisfy their expectations and needs because this will be a factor that will keep them motivated and focused on their purpose. This factor is important to students and inspires them to complete doctoral programs that assist with professional development and career growth (Holmes et al., 2016).

As the highest degree awarded, successful completion of a doctorate demands that learners work at a conceptual level. Doctoral students need to familiarize themselves with the norms, ethics, and techniques of their field. They are expected to forge links between concepts, synthesize ideas, critique the work of others, accept critique of their own work (Trafford, 2008), and “engage with the problematical status of knowledge” (Barnacle, 2005, p. 186). The demands of independent, original research intended to extend knowledge in their field can lead to oscillating feelings of confidence, acceptance, and belonging—both intellectually and socially.
Empowerment

Understanding empowerment is essential to achieving success in a doctoral program. Zimmerman (1994) mentions that specifying a clear definition of empowerment could contradict the same concept because it is as complex as the elements that encompass it. In the opinion of Bailey (1992), how empowerment is defined within the projects and programs will depend upon the specific people and context. In an EdD program, empowerment must be defined to promote self-knowledge in order to develop candidates’ use of their skills and competencies to achieve their academic goals to participate in and complete a doctoral program.

For Tapscott (cited by González, 2000), educators and students must be empowered to act and generate quality intelligence, such as good ideas, planning, human information processing, problem solving and decision making, distributed at all levels of the educational organization. Thus, empowerment is the basis for defining responsibility. EdD students seek to become transformational leaders of change and creators of ideas who innovate to achieve the objectives and goals of their own and others in their organization.

Empowerment is a process that improves the effectiveness and performance of candidates for the EdD doctoral program, allowing significant changes in the culture and climate of the organization and maximizing the use of the different capacities of the people (Robinson, 2000). A candidate for a doctoral program requires constant guidance and orientation from the members of the institution where the project is being followed through. Student empowerment offers the opportunity for students to make decisions and become agents that propose innovative ideas in various educational areas. Therefore, empowerment, with sufficient information and adequate resources, creates and facilitates the process of change, so necessary in the educational system, shaping a new vision and culture where teachers and -
administrators benefit in terms of meeting personal and professional goals.

**Resilience**

Intrinsically, resilience alludes to positive adaptation, or the ability to maintain or regain mental health, despite experiencing adversity. Academic resilience is the ability to achieve in an educational setting despite exposure to risk factors (Morales, 2008). McMillan and Reed (1994) contend that positive interpersonal and individual factors play a role in developing academic resilience. Examples of this include family support during the doctoral process, the advisor, mentor guidance to achieve professional goals, and the responsibility toward oneself to achieve proposed objectives. It is very important that doctoral candidates clarify the educational pillars of resilience that will help them continue and finish the program.

**Persistence**

The commitment of students to their education is a key component to promoting positive decisions related to persistence in academic pursuits (Davidson et al., 2009; Walsh & Robinson Kurpius, 2016). Students' strong commitment to the institution improves their degree of satisfaction, their feeling of belonging and the quality that they perceive in the institution. Therefore, steps which can enhance commitment will yield positive results.

It is normal for doctoral candidates to face situations that may complicate their permanence in the program because at the same time they are pursuing a degree, they may have a full-time job, a family that needs them, a personal life that needs tending, and possible health issues. There may also be problems such as anxiety, depression, or stress that negatively impact educational permanence. Tinto (1993) found that for doctoral students, persistence was influenced by factors such as performance on comprehensive tests, research ability, and financial support.
Obstacles exist in any project, so it is important for doctoral candidates to remember why they have decided to participate in their program and maintain their initial motivation by persevering and setting realistic goals. Garcia-Ripa et al. (2017) mention that motivation is very important and often depends on external factors such as family, environment, or friends, and they propose that internal motivation should be maintained throughout the process.

Tinto (2017), in his model of integration and academic success, states that motivation is a key factor in explaining the justification in the choice of academic programs. This integration process, mediated by academic success, responds to personal, contextual, and institutional factors. Personal factors are linked to one's own ability, initial motivation, and achievement (Maurer & Chapman, 2017). Contextual factors are those originating from the immediate environment, colleagues, teachers, family, and friends. Institutional factors are those related to the institution where the doctorate is carried out.

Conclusion

Candidates for a doctoral program need to be clear about the reasons that have led them to pursue the doctorate in order to maintain motivation, interest, and concentration in the development of the program, which will ultimately result in successful completion. Various internal and external factors may affect the completion of this degree. Therefore, doctoral students must actively reach out to their institution and colleagues for help in fulfilling those needs. Above all, these students need to trust that persistence is decisive to successfully concluding a doctoral program. Equipped with these internal and external tools, students can build the future they dream.
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Purpose, Empowerment, and Persistence for All

Stephanie Wittmer

As cultural competency trickles upward with students who are growing up in increasingly diverse educational and social environments, doctoral programs that do not reflect a transformational and social justice purpose will risk high attrition rates if they have difficulty supporting students’ sense of purpose, empowerment, and persistence. Educators and students thrive when they approach their work with purpose, empowerment, and persistence, yet in education these attributes are not equally accessible to all students, especially students from marginalized groups. Educators who engage in the rigorous journey of a doctoral degree must have the internal fortitude and institutional support to strengthen these attributes. In turn these doctoral students will become practitioner scholars with skills to ensure their own students can access and attain purpose, empowerment, and persistence as well. The role of a doctoral program in providing the space for purpose, empowerment, and persistence to flourish must not be underestimated. All students—doctoral students and the students they may teach as practitioner-scholars—deserve access and opportunity to develop these traits, yet too often education itself is a barrier rather than a support in this development.

Purpose

Doctoral students have a variety of purposes for completing a doctoral program. Some purposes align with faculty perceptions of student purpose; others do not. Faculty perceptions of purpose often center on students wishing to make an original contribution to their professions, preparing to be knowledgeable workers, accessing career benefits, transforming personal skills or knowledge, gaining professional credibility, and acting altruistically (Akerlind & McAlpine, 2017; Loxley & Kearns,
Similarly, student perceptions of purpose center around acquiring technical and cognitive skills and personal resourcefulness (Mowbray & Halse, 2010). While similar to faculty perceptions, the list is not representative or exhaustive.

Missing are the perceptions of students from marginalized groups. These overlooked perceptions of student purpose represent a gap in research but also in traditional doctoral program design (Porfilio & Strom, 2019). Marginalized perspectives, however, are represented in a few case studies of social justice-oriented doctoral programs and offer critical guidance for all doctoral programs wishing to prepare practitioner scholars to educate 21st century students (Porfilio & Strom, 2019; Porfilio et al., 2019). From a social justice perspective, the purpose of a doctoral program is to empower students to challenge paternalism and marginalization, to resist the hierarchy of knowledge, to demand critical thought, and to force inclusive perspectives into research practices (Gray & Mehra, 2021). Doctoral students empowered to pursue such purposes become prepared to meet the academic and social justice needs of the troubled educational system (Porfilio & Strom, 2019).

Programs built upon frameworks of social justice and inclusion not only affirm the purposes of students from marginalized groups but also embed an affirming and inclusive model of education in the practitioner scholars who will in turn provide it for their own students. As a result, both doctoral students and the students they teach will be more likely to thrive in an environment that protects and empowers students’ sense of purpose. Most importantly, practitioner scholars and their students would be empowered to be agents of change in other aspects of their lives and communities.
Empowerment

The unfortunate reality is that most doctoral students become practitioner scholars in programs that are not designed to empower all students. Contemporary academic practices cling to historically disempowering patterns of racism, sexism, and elitism (Porfilio & Strom, 2019). These patterns and practices include disregarding oral histories in research, obstructing critical theories from scholarship, marginalizing qualitative methods, exclusionary admissions and financial practices, White-centric academic language, and power dynamics between faculty and committee members and students (Brookfield, 2015; Gray & Mehra, 2021). These oppressive and marginalizing practices exclude the backgrounds, methods, language, and values of many students who feel unsupported, isolated, and disempowered as a result.

Empowerment becomes accessible to all students when a program or institution is designed around the practice of identifying and challenging marginalizing power dynamics. Such a program must invite multiple perspectives in decision-making and evaluation, the uncovering and dismantling of bias, and critical reflection of power relationships (Brookfield, 2015). These practices instill empowerment in previously disempowered students while also instilling awareness, advocacy, and action in students from dominant identity groups. The result of programs that create culturally affirming environments is a group of doctoral students empowered to apply this awareness, advocacy, and action in their work environments and to model it as practitioner-scholars for their own students.

Persistence

In addition to creating empowered students, student perceptions of a culturally affirming environment predict and correlate to student persistence (Moore, 2013). Comfort within the
educational environment and cultural congruity are two factors in the cultural dimension of the Psychosociocultural Framework for academic persistence of under-represented college students (Castillo, 2002; Gloria, 2000). Persistence is also influenced by psychological and social factors that are over-emphasized, historically. This emphasis persists in educational settings as the deficit model (Castillo, 2002). More recent theoretical models acknowledge that institutions themselves impact student persistence. One study determined that instructor interactions with students was a more significant factor than any other (Motl et al., 2018). An institution’s ability to integrate these cultural competencies influences how a student persists through the program.

An institution’s ability to be culturally congruent with students depends on its commitment to uncovering, reflecting on, and transforming barriers to persistence. Environments and faculty attitudes that are competitive, impersonal, individualistic, unaccepting of other cultures, biased, or lacking sensitivity impede student persistence when these values conflict with students’ cultural values (Castillo, 2002). Persistence is compromised when a school environment fails to create social unity and support for all students (Castillo, 2002). As the demographics of students seeking doctoral degrees diversifies, an institution that does not remove these cultural barriers will suffer lower levels of student persistence and fail to remain competitive in attracting and retaining students. Additionally, students who do persist through such programs may not acquire or develop the necessary transformative lens that is desperately needed in the field of education.

Conclusion

A doctoral program in education has the potential to transform society through its contribution to research, its development of practitioner scholars, and its indirect influence on
children served by practitioner scholars. Transformation requires that unjust policies and practices are challenged, that inclusive approaches are built into curriculum, pedagogy, decision-making, and politics of a program, and that doctoral students of all backgrounds find comfort and cultural congruity in their doctoral program. Programs designed in this way will affirm and reflect the values, beliefs, and purposes of all students. Empowered to challenge unjust practices in their doctoral journey, students will develop the courage and skills to become practitioner scholars who challenge unjust practices that they and their students face in their workplace environments. Students, seeing their teachers model advocacy, inclusion, and transformative practices will be more likely to adopt transformative practices and values as well. Doctoral programs that embed transformative practices into all aspects of teaching and learning—that allow all students to be empowered and to persist—are still in the minority. How long before programs centered on social justice become the norm rather than the exception? Programs that embrace transformative practices will attract and retain more students. Those students will become practitioner scholars who spread transformative practices far beyond the doctoral program itself.

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The doctoral journey is an endeavor only as valuable as the experience one makes of it as a professional learner, aspirational researcher, and experienced practitioner within their field. Such a personal journey requires an understanding and application of several critical elements. Purpose, empowerment, and persistence are aspects of a doctoral journey widely researched and referenced in the design of doctoral programming. Doctoral students draw on such elements as they navigate their own development within established professional programs, seeking opportunities to explore new content, hone skills, and work towards earning their conferred degree.

**Purpose**

Purpose directs the interests of many individuals within their educational aspirations. The purpose to grow as an individual, the purpose to make a difference in the lives of others, and the purpose to contribute to the knowledgebase within a field of study are three unique purposes each may lead to the pursuit of higher education. Through the analysis of professional doctoral programs, Armsby et al. (2018) found a core thread of professional doctoral programs is to engage in experiences that are aligned with practice-based outcomes, while still emphasizing research, theory, and writing abilities. Notably, this is often with a more interdisciplinary approach that is helpful for conceptualizing and applying research (Armsby et al., 2018). A balance of focusing on the practicality of research, unpacking of research for application, and the skills required to conduct research provide professional doctoral students an ability to engage in career opportunities that require a diverse set of skills within both academic and practical practices.
Doctoral students who pursue an education doctorate are likely to be mid-career professionals, already in a professional role, such as in a classroom, or in a leadership role, who may not have the time or ability to dedicate to longer residency programs (Kung, 2017). Programs aligning with an EdD focus serve a purpose for developing practitioner-researchers who can derive actionable meaning from research and those who can conduct practical research within the field. While a newly minted Doctor of Education may lack experience with multi-year research studies and grant-based research, they bring career experience and authentic perspective to the field. The perspective and context of one’s purpose allow for such programs to prepare the doctoral student in individually driven focus areas, bringing added value to their own interests.

To contextualize the purpose of a doctoral program, one must select and enter a program that supports their goals and with purpose in mind. As the EdD is a practitioner-focused terminal degree, not all programs contain coursework designed to support the practice of a teacher-scholar in a higher education institution. Yet, while the EdD requires aspects of research and encourages publication, not all programs contain coursework focused on the instructional elements within a higher education institution. Mimirinis and Ahlberg (2021) note that the literature on how doctoral students experience or understand teaching at a university level is sparse and that teaching is an overlooked facet within academic development. To gain such instructional experiences, prospective doctoral students must be mindful of their career intention, prior experiences, and selected programs. Returning to the field, newly conferred practitioner-scholars must remember their purpose when applying new skills in their profession and continue to hone their craft through continuous learning.
Empowerment

If the purpose of a professional doctoral program is to enrich intellectual capacity, research experience, and practitioner leadership skills of an individual, then the purpose of such programming is professional empowerment. As the number of doctoral programs continues to expand and more practitioner and field-based researchers enter academia (Armsby et al., 2018), a shift within the institution of higher education is required. The perspectives of doctoral program options must be evaluated with a keen eye to where power lies and where power is leveraged.

With the empowerment of doctoral students comes a shift in power between learner, faculty, and the institution. Through the destabilization of the hierarchy of supervision, doctoral students gain more autonomy and legitimate power over their studies, hence taking more active and advanced responsibilities in their education (Tian & Singhasiri, 2016). While this destabilization is not intended to disrespect the experiences and expertise of faculty, faculty must heed to the new levels of personalization within the culture of education. At a societal level, the increase in professional doctoral programs has resulted in more specialized offerings for potential doctoral students (Armsby, 2018). At an institutional level, shifting the faculty focus from supervision to exploration and refinement of topics, doctoral students are further empowered through having relationships with their faculty and advisors that are deeply personal and rooted in co-constructed interest.

Applying this power shift in context requires an analysis of traditional practices and their impacts on learning. When disrupting the traditional hierarchical supervision structure within doctoral programs, it should be noted that this power shift supports the learning process (Tian & Singhasiri, 2016). The hierarchical nature of a supervisor-supervisee interaction does not yield any consistent or measurable outcomes yet reduces the opportunity for
doctoral students to engage in meaningful interactions that are foundational for their own independent empowerment as a researcher (Tian & Singhasiri, 2016). Through developing this new sense of independent empowerment as a researcher, doctoral students are now personally empowered within their specialties and future practices.

Persistence

While purpose and empowerment bring learners new opportunities, persistence is an element of a doctoral student’s journey that may bring determination or discouragement. Persistence includes practices that contribute to the development of a researcher’s identity including personal, social, informal, and formal learner experiences (Mantai, 2017), or obstacles to learning, which are misguided, systemic, or placed without an academic need (Heffernan, 2019). While doctoral students are engaging in efforts of persistence, appropriate structure, guidance, and social support must be in place.

The development of doctoral program experiences is a comprehensive project that requires dedicated faculty with a collective vision in mind. Heffernan (2019) suggests “make sure the right kinds of obstacles are in place—neither obstacles that discourage learning because they wrongly presume the [learner] has already absorbed preliminary concepts nor obstacles that pose no challenge” (para. 11). Elements of persistence are needed within a doctoral program, specifically within the significant writing components of doctoral work. Creating experiences for doctoral students to engage in various styles of writing, participate in constructive feedback loops, and have the opportunity to review the work of others are all experiences that create instances for healthy persistence to grow. Mantai (2017) found that an inclusive research culture that welcomes new researchers and writers, allows doctoral students to engage in informal exchanges with peers, seeking those whom they have value and trust, for support
through challenging times. Further, Mantai (2017) identifies various practices that contribute to the development of a researcher’s identity including personal, social, informal, and formal learner experiences. Doctoral coursework must be acknowledged as “identity shaping events of a social and predominately informal nature” (Mantai, 2017, p. 646). Through such experiences, students develop persistence founded upon autonomy that is authentic to one’s own interests and shaped through the candidate’s navigation through the structure of a doctoral program.

Contextualizing persistence within doctoral programs at large is an impossible task as there are many working definitions of persistence within the fields that are supported by EdD programs. Within the context of education, persistence is either ushered as a great character trait, called ‘grit’ by Duckworth, or scrutinized by BIPOC educators (Shelton, 2021) and advocacy groups as a supremacist and classist term used to justify the differences in learners based on intersectionality. The multifaceted understanding and use of persistence demonstrates that contextualization of words, meanings, and intention matter at all levels of education.

The Interdisciplinary Contextualization of Concepts

To gauge authenticity in work, one must reflect on those who have expertise in their studies and their personal contexts in their own fields of study, regardless of their credentials. The contextualization of knowledge, a common learning strategy under the learning philosophy of constructivism, relies on the application of knowledge to one’s experiences, backgrounds, and areas of study. Through this process, experts apply research findings to scenarios that are applicable to the everyday practitioner and the public. The contextualization of knowledge requires a strong understanding of the literature supporting a
specific topic, a broad experience in the field, and the current societal issues and needs.

Conclusion

Purpose, empowerment, and persistence are elements of a doctoral journey that doctoral students and faculty should constructively critique and problematize. Each of these terms requires the contextualization of meaning, the application to all fields of study, and a lens to the historical and trending use in practice. While good-natured, these terms are able to uplift the spirits of doctoral students and inspire their success; the unintended use of each can negate the same. As the academy continues to grow, as more academics enter all fields of study, and as society continues to develop stronger understandings of what will be needed for the future, it is those who seek a different perspective that will make unexpected differences as a newly minted doctors and practitioner in their field.

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Purpose, Empowerment, and Persistence: Driving Doctoral Students with Disabilities toward Success

Megan L. Hansen

The Doctor in Education (EdD) degree has gained popularity in recent years. EdD programs differ from traditional PhD programs in that they focus on the practitioner (Nygaard & Savva, 2021). Hawkes (2016) determined that most EdD students enrolled in an EdD program after witnessing a long-standing problem in their field where a solution was needed. Postgraduate programs, therefore, provide opportunities to contribute to students’ areas of interest and while offering an environment to grow a scholarly identity (Åkerlind & McAlpine, 2017).

Among doctoral students are burgeoning scholars with learning disabilities (LD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). This marginalized group makes up less than 13 percent of graduate students in the United States (Burry, 2017). Ehlinger and Ropers (2020) explain that Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Acts that followed provided students with disabilities more access to higher education (2020). Even though one in ten students enrolled in higher education identifying as disabled, only around one percent of journal articles published focus on students with learning disabilities (Peña, 2014). Students with learning disabilities face many challenges in higher education that their neurotypical classmates may not. These challenges range from increased stress and anxiety affecting academic performance to potential cognitive and emotional difficulties (Gabriely et al., 2020).

For students with learning disabilities to succeed in an EdD program, they must identify their purpose for participating in the program. Their purpose should provide the needed interest to maintain focus in an ever-demanding program. EdD students must feel empowered while disregarding self-doubt to push through the
challenging times. Finally, doctoral students with learning disabilities must be persistent. Students must continue moving forward no matter how slow the momentum.

**Purpose**

There is some disagreement among scholars on the purpose of an EdD. The debate falls primarily between the need for a doctoral student to be an academic through research and skills development and the practitioners who study and apply (Åkerlind & McAlpine, 2017; Nygaard & Savva, 2021). However, Åkerlind and McAlpine (2017) suggest a third purpose: the doctoral student’s ability to grow as an individual through their interest, commitment, and engagement with the program. Students with specific learning disabilities, such as Dyslexia and ADHD, need to determine their purpose for obtaining an EdD, whereby focus and direction become critical forces of their success.

EdD students must decide if their purpose of achieving a doctoral degree is to go on to teach, become a researcher, or work towards improving the needs of society (Nygaard & Savva, 2021). Åkerlind and McAlpine’s (2017) research indicated that the purpose of a doctorate could be to develop as an individual and focuses on the student’s enjoyment and self-development, which supports students who do not intend to become lifelong researchers. Instead, the candidate focuses their studies and research on a topic of interest or desired systemic problem. “Motivated students are important because lack of motivation can lead to lack of completion” (Åkerlind & McAlpine, 2017, p. 1694). Students with LD and ADHD struggle with organization, study, and executive functioning skills (O’Shea & Thurman, 2017). Being motivated and interested in their EdD program and having a solid understanding of their purpose is vital to these students’ success. Motivation and a strong sense of purpose will provide focus, foster understanding, and identify goals for the students to work towards, not far from the direction of an
Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which many students with LD have in elementary through high school.

To determine the purpose of pursuing an EdD degree, it is also important for the student to decide on their personal identity. Jacobs et al. (2022) found that students with LD and ADHD had a lower academic self-concept than their neurotypical peers. However, Łockiewicz et al. (2014) suggest that students with dyslexia have high expectations for personal accomplishments. Students must determine if their LD and ADHD are part of their identity, and if they are, the student must find ways for them to be positive driving forces. As a participant in Dale and Taylor’s (2001) study said, “it’s a specialty [,] not a disability” (p. 1006). Understanding who they are and what they want to accomplish will help drive them to success.

**Empowerment**

For LD and ADHD doctoral students, leveraging empowerment is critical to their success. A sense of empowerment would help LD and ADHD students focus on their strengths instead of their perceived weaknesses. Students with LD and ADHD have proved successful in higher education. They have developed and identified their skillset and shown an ability to continue learning. What once may have been seen as a deficit can be considered an asset, such as the ability to think outside the box instead of just linearly.

Nygaard and Savva (2021) suggest that each doctoral candidate suffers from an internal struggle while creating a scholarly or academic identity. EdD students often struggle with imposter syndrome, having been away from academia for many years (Nygaard & Savva, 2021). Becoming a researcher may feel uncomfortable, and identifying as an academic rather than a teacher can forge a misplaced sense of being (Nygaard & Savva, 2021). Students with LD and ADHD have an additional layer of
self-doubt, having endured judgment from peers, teachers, and professors about their ability to be successful throughout their educational careers (Ehlinger & Ropers, 2020).

To find success in higher education, LD and ADHD students must have skills in self-determination, self-efficacy, and self-advocacy (Kutscher & Tuckwiller, 2019), especially when they struggle with executive functioning skills and lack robust study and organizational skills (O’Shea & Thurman, 2017). Many LD and ADHD students avoid disclosing their disabilities for fear of standing out as different and being outcast by their community (Ehlinger & Ropers, 2020). Ehlinger and Ropers (2020) learned that not all doctoral students want a separate identity from their disability. The desire to become self-sufficient and to let go of the title and identity they have carried with them causes some students to withhold disclosure. EdD students who want to separate their identity from their disability and avoid using accommodations and modifications must build their self-determination, efficacy, and advocacy.

Many studies have shown that the need for relationships and feeling connected is vital in finding success in a doctoral program (O’Shea & Thurman, 2017; Ehlinger & Ropers, 2020; Nygarrd & Savva, 2021). Collins (2015) determined that the relationship between doctoral students and their supervisors was crucial to success. Whether doctoral supervision is provided in a one-to-one setting, a panel, or a team, for the students, those relationships are essential. Collins’ (2015) the most prominent themes among doctoral students with disabilities and quality supervision was the need for the candidate to get along well with the person supervisor. The participants stated the need for good communication, flexibility, willingness to accommodate differences, and willingness to provide support at particular times (Collins, 2015, Figure 2). If the supervisory relationship is strong, the doctoral student and supervisor should be able to work through
the challenging aspects of a doctoral program (Collins, 2015). EdD students with LD and ADHD need a support system to succeed, especially if they choose not to use the additional resources provided by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Support determines success, so without it, there is a possibility of failure.

Terry and Ghosh (2015) examine mentor relationship domains, including academic, personal, and workplace. In the academic domain, students receive support from faculty, professors, and cohort members related to the EdD program (Terry & Ghosh, 2015). The personal domain represents support from family and friends who help the doctoral student by maintaining the household, helping with daily responsibilities, and being cheerleaders during difficult times (Terry & Ghosh, 2015). And finally, in the workplace, supervisors coach students and offer daily support within their work environment (Terry & Ghosh, 2015). With support in all three domains, LD and ADHD students are more likely to succeed. Not only will they receive support in most aspects of their life, but they are also provided with a wide range of diverse resources to help them approach each bump along the way.

Empowerment can also be found through community building (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Nygaard and Savva (2021) explain that finding or creating social support is essential to the success of EdD students regardless of disability. EdD students tend to be nontraditional students who hold professional jobs while attending school, which can provide additional stress and intensify loneliness. It is good practice to create a community that potentially shares similar interests, allows for social opportunities, and creates a safe environment for support and feedback (Nygaard & Savva, 2021). Having a community to be honest with, ask questions, and share celebrations and challenges
is critical to the mental health and sense of empowerment of EdD students with LD and ADHD.

**Persistence**

In 2012 Wendler et al. predicted an increase in demand for doctoral degrees by 22% (O’Shea & Thurman, 2017), and between 2019 and 2020, there were 13,051 doctoral degrees awarded in education within the United States (Duffin, 2022). Graduate studies are increasingly driving students back to the classroom, yet even with the prediction of doctoral needs, attrition rates continue to be a concern. Doctoral programs have a 40-60% attrition rate (Chrzanowski & Poudyal, 2019). Much current research on persistence and attrition in postgraduate programs does not focus on students with LD and ADHD (O’Shea & Thurman, 2017, p. 151). However, research has shown many contributing factors to attrition rates from lack of time management, organizational and study skills, interest and motivation to complete work, and personal sacrifices (O’Shea & Thurman, 2017), which relate to the challenges LD and ADHD students experience.

For EdD students with LD and ADHD to complete their programs, they must have a significant amount of persistence or grit. Duckworth et al.m (2017) define grit as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals […] working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over the years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress” (pp.1087-1088). Any EdD student, but especially those with LD and ADHD, must be willing to work hard. The goal of an EdD program is to grow the student’s identity to one of a scholar. LD and ADHD students may be derailed or stuck at a crossroad throughout their doctoral journey, but persistence will help them continue a forward momentum, no matter the rate.
LD and ADHD students can benefit from a shift in the mindset from believing they have a disability to believing it is an intrinsic part of their identity. Bacon and Bennet (2013) revealed that for many students with LD and ADHD, the farther into higher education they persisted, the greater self-worth they felt. One participant explained he no longer saw dyslexia as a “flaw” rather it was a positive driving force that required him to work harder and build his determination to succeed (Bacon & Bennett, 2013). Many participants in this study identified the need to work harder than many of their peers. The hard work, though difficult at times, allowed for growth in determination and perseverance, which positively attributed to success. Determination and accomplishment are two forces that can drive an LD and ADHD student to success.

Postsecondary institutions are required to create equitable learning environments (Ehlinger & Ropers, 2021; O’Shea & Thurman, 2017). Students with LD and ADHD should use self-advocacy and request the support and accommodations they need to be successful (O’Shea & Thurman, 2017). Ehlinger and Ropers (2020) suggest that professors can help by creating an environment that honors the LD and ADHD students’ identities. Creating an environment that values diverse learners, seeks and validates student perspectives, and creates a welcoming atmosphere (Ehlinger & Ropers, 2020) is likely to improve the integration of all students (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017). Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2017) determined that the degree of integration, both academically and socially, played a significant role in EdD students’ perseverance. Students who feel connected to their program, their professors, and their peers are more likely to continue to persist than those who feel disconnected.

Persistence in completing an EdD program is crucial. There are so many factors that can disrupt or derail a doctoral student; having systems, strategies, and plain old-fashioned grit
are needed to achieve success. Understanding strengths and weaknesses and communicating with those in the program will increase the likelihood of completion of an EdD program.

Conclusion

Students with learning disabilities and ADHD represent a small population of students working toward their EdD. Even for the neurotypical student, an EdD program’s demanding pace and high expectations can prove challenging. EdD students must find a purpose and identity that will drive excitement and enjoyment in their degree; they must also feel empowered through relationships with cohort members and supervisors. Finally, EdD students must persist even through the most challenging times through the strength of grit, community, and self-determination.

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The Practitioner-Scholar Dilemma: The Gap Between Research and Praxis

Elizabeth Herzog

In education, bridging the gap between research and praxis requires specific tools, including the practitioner scholar (PS). Practitioner-scholars are research-oriented leaders who are prepared to ameliorate tension between evidence-based practices and classroom application. Whether they succeed, however, is dependent on their ability to translate critical research skills into methodologies, policies, and procedures that positively influence students. To be successful, practitioner-scholars must go beyond the content in their preparation programs, such as an EdD, to develop a reflective practice that is built to evolve.

The Gap in Purpose

Practitioner-scholars should use scholarly sources to understand how the concept of purpose has changed in education. The purpose of education in the *liberal tradition* is to create free-thinkers and an educated, engaged citizenry (Null, 2017). Liberal scholars like Dewey (1990) believed that education works when the community wants for all children what a parent wants for their child. In contrast, the purpose of education in the *systematic tradition* is to prepare students for the global workplace by emphasizing measurement and efficiency (Null, 2017). Systematic scholars like Charters (1928) believed that uniform adoption of standards aligned with utility, would legitimize the science of learning. In another view, the purpose of education in the *radical tradition* is equitable learning opportunities in service of the common good (Null, 2017). Radical scholars like Giroux (2021) believe that only through a “language of critique and hope” can education become the human right that it was intended to be (p. 204).
The Autistic Gap in Purpose

Autistic students, however, are often excluded from the above traditions. The pathology paradigm disinherited autistic students from their future purpose by weaponizing “differences” to oppress, demean, exclude, and harm (Minich, 2016). The neurodiversity movement posited a counter-narrative (Singer, 2017), which Sinclair (2012) illustrates as widening the purpose of education for autistic students to include their identity:

Autism is a way of being. It is pervasive; it colors every experience, every sensation, perception, thought, emotion, and encounter, every aspect of existence. It is not possible to separate the autism from the person--and if it were possible, the person you'd have left would not be the same person you started with (p. 1).

Normative constructs of functioning cast the autistic way of being as wrong and rationalize the need for replacement skill instruction (Fletcher-Watson, 2018). By locating the insider perspective, the PS learns that education for autistic students has a built-in purpose to increase normative behaviors at the expense of personal agency and access to the general education curriculum.

Intersectional & Epistemological Lens for Purpose

An intersectional lens reveals issues of compounded marginalization. Students with more than one historically marginalized identity face unique, compounding circumstances and barriers to their education compared to their peers (Crenshaw, 1989). For example, the radical tradition stresses the liberating purpose of education via equitable opportunities and the result has been myriad inclusion and equity initiatives in schools nationwide. However, without a roadmap to navigate the intersections of difference, especially for privileged staff, many marginalized students “struggle to embrace, express and
advocate for their multiple identities” (Bell, 2016, p. 41). To support an autistic student’s agency and, therefore, the purpose for education, the practitioner-scholars must recognize and remove barriers caused by their social identities.

An epistemological lens reveals issues of social justice. Schooling resides within a “socially constructed ‘reality’ which limits and distorts the way we perceive and think about problems,” so school systems and staff unintentionally perpetuate dominant narratives that harm students (Fernández-Balboa, 1992, p. 61). For example, the systematic tradition universalized the practice of ranking students based on standardized measures, and as a result, standardized instruments are used in special education to determine a student’s need for replacement instruction. This occurs through unexamined assumptions about the oppressive nature of normative models that define certain characteristics as undesirable. Therefore, even well-intended school systems restrict agency from autistic students when it comes to constructing their own purposes for education.

**Practitioner-Scholar Response to Purpose**

As a practitioner, the practitioner-scholars leads others by example. Autistic students need support to determine their purpose and remove barriers in their educational settings. Environmental change rather than student change should be the conduit for inclusion (Minich, 2016). An intersectional approach to change will decrease the research-to-praxis gap and increase autistic students’ access to their education. Lastly, the use of standardized measures of functioning is problematic because it stigmatizes differences. A student-centered approach that emphasizes measures of well-being, diverse development, coping strategies, or autonomy is more inclusive for promoting positive change (Leadbitter et al, 2021).
As a scholar, a practitioner-scholars may choose to prioritize research that restores agency for marginalized students. In the last two decades, autistic scholars and stakeholders have begun directing the autistic research agenda (Leadbitter et al., 2021). Their work has replaced the medical model with contextualized representations of the lived experiences of neurodiverse people (Chapman, 2020; Doyle & McDowall, 2021; Minich, 2016). Autistic research partnerships have amplified the agency of autistic people to redefine their own purpose for education (Australian Autism Research Council, 2022; Autistica, 2015). An ethical methodology that highlights autistic perspectives via participatory action research supports the advancement of autistic research partnerships (den Houting et al., 2021; Nicolaidis et al., 2019).

The Gap in Empowerment

Scholarly sources highlight how empowerment has changed over time. First, it was rooted in elitist notions from Greek philosophers like Aristotle and Plato who argued that only those with reason, self-control, and certain soul types were fit to be educated (Null, 2017). Later, liberal scholars like Mann and Dewey championed access as vital to the success of democracy; exclusion in all forms, be it geography, taxation, slavery, or poverty, was a threat to democratic equality and social justice (Cohan & Howlett, 2019). Radical scholars like Freire foregrounded hegemonic ideologies that limit personal empowerment (Breuing, 2011), but still fail to restore human rights (Giroux, 2021). The substantive oversight that Michael Apple calls the threat of “losing our political soul on the altar of grand theorizing” can fetishize personal liberties like empowerment (Null, 2017, p. 119). The concept of empowerment has become more inclusive over time but struggles to be ensured.
The Autistic Gap in Empowerment

To locate empowerment in the autistic community whose rallying cry is “nothing about us, without us” (Silberman, 2015) gives voice to that community. Hegemonic ideologies have limited empowerment to serve the needs of the dominant group (Fernández-Balboa, 1993). However, the status quo is being upended by autistic advocates. The architect of ASAN, Ari Ne’eman, critiqued a 2007 ad campaign from NYU’s prestigious Child Study Center that read: “We have your son. We will make sure he will not be able to care for himself or interact socially as long as he lives. - Autism” (Silberman, 2015, p. 456). Ne’eman’s radical challenge from an organization run solely by autistics for autistics resulted in the ads being pulled within days. By locating the insider perspective, a practitioner-scholar can demonstrate how empowerment and personal authorship are interconnected for autistic people.

Intersectional & Epistemological Lens for Empowerment

An intersectional lens reveals issues of privilege. Restoring empowerment for autistic students requires educators to consider how a student’s identity intersects with their experience of disability in diverse expressions (Knoll, 2022). This prevents the inevitable failure of a one-size-fits-all approach because “oppression is experienced differently based on the various combinations of a person’s positionality factors” and “shift as we move from one space to another” (Siliman & Kearns, 2020, p. 49). A key understanding is that any universal experience of disability is reductive, which is why intersectionality must be a tool of the trade.

An epistemological lens reveals issues of power. Research and theory largely ignore neurodiverse ways of thinking and restrict avenues of personal empowerment for autistic stakeholders (Doyle & McDowall, 2021). To ensure
empowerment for autistic students, the very notion of critical thinking itself could be challenged by examining what problems to focus on and who benefits or loses from such scrutiny (Fernández-Balboa, 1993). Autistic researcher/stakeholder contributions to knowledge production remain largely invisible in the wider academic community (Pukki et al., 2002), which may help explain why the continued use of normative classroom intervention minimizes empowerment for autistic students.

**Practitioner-Scholar Response to Empowerment**

Student empowerment is realized when students are known, understood, and valued by their teachers (Lazzell et al., 2018). Unique identities and experiences shape what students know about the world and how they perceive their environment. Takacs (2003) maintains that “by respecting the unique life experiences that each student brings into the classroom […] we empower all students as knowledge makers” (p. 28). Minich (2016) recommends a classroom where the “labor of access becomes individualized rather than institutionalized” to leverage personal empowerment (p. 4). Relationships reveal personal barriers that exclude autistic students from their education, but this can change.

Partnerships with autistic researchers and stakeholders may address the precarious quality of life outcomes that persist for autistic people (Minich, 2016). One approach is to align with the body of work created by autistic scholars for autistic people. Their research agenda urgently addresses the gap with relevant topics (Leadbetter, 2021); a shift in methodologies (Pukki et al., 2022); direct connection to the well-being of autistic people across the lifespan (Roche et al., 2021); research priorities established via autistic stakeholders (Poulson et al., 2022); and strict alignment to neurodiversity precepts (den Houting & Pellicano, 2021).
The Gap in Persistence

Research reveals the persistence of inequality in schooling and its connection to the radical tradition. Apple’s approach to such persistence politicizes class relations and reveals hidden curriculum and power structures (Null, 2017). However, his approach lacks the curricular retooling needed for a more just society. Freire’s (1970) approach went a step further to focus on pedagogy and critiqued the banking concept of education and reinforcing socio-political stations in life. His specific guidance included tools, like dialogics, but ignored how teachers should respond to neutrality (Freire, 1970). Fernández-Balboa’s (1993) approach addresses critical thinking and knowledge construction in academia but lacks actionable steps to restore conscience in research and publishing practices. Giroux (2021) strives to define a modern expression of the social promise, however, in his most recent 209-page book on the topic, he provides vague direction and reserves them for the last nine pages. Decades of research point to the persistence of inequality and the failure of the radical tradition to pass the litmus test of application, despite their intellectual bandwidth.

The Autistic Gap in Persistence

For autistic students, inequality persists in its pathological origin, which according to Walker (2016), uses science to legitimize bigotry and oppression. The medical model of autism limits the agency of neurominorities through normative descriptions of communication, interaction, and behavior (APA, 2013). New approaches are needed to interrupt dominant narratives of normativity, acknowledge the complex intersection of identity, and deconstruct oppressive systems (Munoz, 1997). Deficit-based models have real-world consequences such as restricted opportunities in school and the workplace (Doyle & MacDowall, 2021). Conversely, the neurodiversity movement posits liberating models that emphasize social (Walker, 2016),
biopsychosocial (Doyle, 2020), and ecological (Chapman, 2020) determinants of functioning rather than personal deficits.

**Intersectional & Epistemological Lens for Persistence**

An intersectional lens reveals issues of tokenism. Affirming and contextualizing the persistent experience of inequality can be achieved by employing the curriculum to understand the relationship between power and privilege (Bell, 2016). For example, understanding that minoritized students understand oppression through experience whereas privileged students understand through instruction is necessary to prevent institutional harm (Lorde, 1984). Since all privilege includes voyeurism (Hill Collins, 1993) classroom activities should anonymize participation. Also, the practice of using “marginalized people as props” for the education of their privileged peers must be eliminated (Siliman & Kearns, 2020).

An epistemological lens reveals issues of agency. However, practitioner-scholars can disrupt the persistent experience of inequality by showing students that their views are not inevitable (Takacs, 2003). Teaching the skill of introspection vs. simple knowledge regurgitation allows students to author the story of who they are and how it affects what they know about the world (Takacs, 2003). This approach is concerned with the personal agency of students and its related consequence of accountability in the larger community. This is essential to prevent the pitfalls of “nonperformativity,” or a tendency to make something not so through passive statements, for example, “inclusion is important” (Ahmed, 2004). In the end, introspection fosters the agency of marginalized students to insist on real-world action.
Practitioner-Scholar Response to Persistence

As a practitioner, the practitioner-scholar leverages student relationships. Since the medical model of autism continues to identify students and prescribe interventions, the practitioner-scholar’s emancipatory power is in their relationship with the autistic student in front of them. Relationships with students uncover unique intersections of difference and illuminate barriers and pathways to access (Minich, 2016). As a school leader, the practitioner-scholar can also maximize relationships with colleagues to translate research into professional development and challenge the inevitable push-back from questioning the status quo (Goodman, 2011). To interrogate the beliefs and actions that influence student access, the practitioner-scholar fosters trusting, professional relationships that keep the ego in check in the service of students.

As a scholar, the practitioner-scholar demonstrates accountability through action. Since schooling resides in a sociopolitical context, neutrality is simply another form of oppression used to maintain persistent inequality. Dominant groups can weaponize neutrality to minimize emancipatory critical thinking, or the challenge of beliefs, ideologies, and practices that underpin social injustice (Fernández-Balboa, 1992). For the practitioner-scholar, accountability includes what is studied, the theoretical frameworks cast for illumination, the purpose of the methodologies employed, and what stakeholders are prioritized.

Conclusion

Practitioner-scholars matter in the lives of autistic students and to all students whose access to education has been marginalized by the beliefs and actions of others. An intersectionality lens highlights issues of compounded marginalization, privilege, and tokenism. Serving as an
instrument, the practitioner-scholar enacts change when leading by example, removing barriers to access, and building relationships with all students. As a tool, the lens of epistemology magnifies issues of social justice, power, and agency, yet as an instrument, the practitioner-scholar enacts change by engaging in research that restores agency for marginalized students, creating ethical research partnerships, and demonstrating accountability in their profession. The practitioner-scholar’s role is to build and reinforce the bridge across the research-to-praxis gap, precisely where students fall through the cracks. The effective ones will negotiate this dual role with a specific toolbox to contextualize historic scholarship with humility, locate the relative insider/outsider perspectives, and problematize through student-centered lenses. With these skills and knowledge, practitioner-researchers can write new agendas for emancipatory education where knowledge and beliefs, shaped by identity and experience, illuminate a radical way forward.

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Purpose, Persistence, and Empowerment: The Drive Behind the Doctorate

Lindsey M. Reishus

The purpose of the Education Doctorate (EdD) varies for each student, but the overreaching goals are largely the same: personal advancement within the field of education to create change, improve learning, and promote accessibility the future generations. Throughout their course of study, doctoral students explore personal reasons for seeking a doctorate, including what they want to do with their degree and how they plan to reach their goals. Students’ individual purposes for enrolling in an Ed. D program coupled with the tools they employ for maintaining persistence within their coursework helps to build a feeling of personal empowerment as a newly minted EdD. Regardless of an individual’s purpose for seeking a doctoral degree, students need to practice persistence in the face of difficulty, which will help create feelings of empowerment as they near completion and start to see themselves as successful contributors to the field of education.

Purpose

Zambo et al. (2013) suggest that since the creation of the EdD in 1920, there has been a clear distinction between this new degree path and the Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degree. A PhD student’s purpose is to contribute knowledge within the field and affect change by conducting studies and interpreting the results. Once the EdD was developed it became a more appropriate path for professionals who are content within their current role or field, and who want to create change to specific issues encountered in their daily work. This is the path that many educators select so they can improve their practice.
For most educators, earning an EdD is a path to creating change within their already established careers. The purpose of obtaining an EdD is to equip oneself with the tools, skills, and resources to be able to create meaningful change within an existing career path. Whether the EdD student wishes to seek a higher position or remain in the classroom and improve their practice, they want to solve problems within their profession and are seeking training in how to conduct research to do so. Their primary purpose is to put their research into practice to better their field (Soika, 2019). Additionally, they want to create more meaningful experiences for their students and inspire their staff to solicit new information and ideas in their own practice.

Research has shown that if students enter a doctoral program with a purpose that is not aligned with their program of choice, they may lose interest (Åkerlind & McAlpine, 2017). To ensure program completion, it is important for students to inform themselves about programs and degree pathways before committing to a program. Many educational institutions offer comparison charts for doctoral students to utilize when making their decision. Students need to select a program that offers support in a way that works for their learning style, and they need to seek committee members whose thinking aligns with their own, and who will offer constructive, positive support throughout the process.

**Persistence**

Once doctoral students are enrolled in their program of choice, they must create meaningful relationships with faculty. Connections and collaboration will help the student persist and focus. Attrition rates are high in EdD programs, yet research suggests areas of support to ensure student success. Such support includes peer social components built into the program, financial support, clear expectations of courses and outcomes, updated information related to institutional or educational changes, and
resources for building resilience, grit, and perseverance (Roberts, 2012).

Roberts (2012) found that students withdrew from educational programs for a wide variety of reasons, but many were related to a lack of confidence and support. Issues related to poor confidence and efficacy, ineffective coping strategies, and learning styles and study skills, influenced participants’ decisions to withdraw (Roberts 2012). To combat these barriers, students should seek a place for collegiate learners to conduct positive discourse, free from judgment or the constraint of grading, and where support can be given on a personal level. Additionally, students should form relationships with their committee members and communicate the type of feedback they will need in order to persist through the process. If these supports cannot be integrated into a program, and a student still wishes to enroll in that school, then they should actively seek out peer and academic support from external sources so they have a supportive network throughout the process.

**Empowerment**

When doctoral students begin to produce quality work, they will begin to feel empowered within their program. They will also begin to realize their purpose as they see positive changes in their own practice and will gain momentum as coworkers begin to see the value in their contributions to the workplace. Evans et al. (2016) shows that educators experience empowerment when they put their work and research into practice. As aspiring educational reformers progress through their programs and receive feedback from peers and supervisors, they will begin to feel their work is gaining momentum, support, and acceptance. This is vital to the journey of the doctoral student. Without a feeling of empowerment, those on the doctoral journey would feel as if they had not accomplished their educational goals. Educators on the EdD path often find areas of improvement within their current
fields and seek to understand them better while discovering potential solutions. It could be argued that if a university or institution provides all the necessary resources needed to help students persist through their program, that empowerment will be a natural occurrence as a result. Students will have increased their self-efficacy, they’ll feel more confident and competent, and they will feel as though their contributions to the field matter and are respected. If programs do not provide those supports, empowerment will in turn be harder to achieve.

**Conclusion**

Purpose, persistence, and empowerment are equal and integral components of any successful EdD program. Regardless of their incoming practitioner experiences, all students need university support to reach their full potential and achieve degree completion. Students must establish support systems and resource networks to persist through challenging courses and extensive research process. And to achieve success and reach their goals, EdD students should keep their end goal in mind, specifically. Feeling of empowerment will encourage students to progress and pursue those goals as they become more confident within their program and continue to receive positive and constructive feedback from professors and peers.

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Purpose, Empowerment, and Persistence in a Doctoral Program

Kari Vollrath

The identity of practitioner scholar forms throughout a Doctor of Education program. The process of developing this identity uncovers capabilities, expands experiences, challenges thinking, and disrupts comfort and current beliefs (McIlveen et al., 2006). Graduates emerge with an enhanced understanding of the self (McIlveen et al., 2006). This intense experience is driven by perseverance and is unlike anything a student has done before in the educational process (McIlveen et al., 2006). Purpose, empowerment, and persistence influence the success of doctoral students completing a Doctor of Education program and influence how they form their scholarly identities.

**Purpose**

The purpose for pursuing a doctorate differs personally and professionally for each doctoral student. Enhanced research skills, qualifications for a research career, creative work opportunities, and intellectual development are common purposes for applying to a program (Åkerlind & McAlpine, 2017). A clearly identified, personal intrinsic purpose, such as helping each student succeed in K-12 education, influences a student’s ability to stay constructively engaged and in constant pursuit of completion. A student who lacks a clear purpose may risk floundering in the program, which leads to anxiety, stress, and the student’s inability to successfully complete the program.

**Purposeful Strategies**

Purposefully managing challenges and demands including time, course workload, and personal obligations influence a student’s positive progression throughout a doctoral program (Devos et al., 2017). Cognitive and technical strategies
assist in successful practices to move the student toward goals, purposefully. Cognitive coping strategies support the need to focus on the purpose and the drive to achieve it. Lindsey et al. (2018) stress the need for cognitive coping strategies for the ups and downs students encounter. Strong organizational skills are essential to managing commitments since personal and professional demands are high in a doctoral program. Technical strategies include developing routines and structures to manage time to be successful, which, when effectively utilized, may reduce stress for students.

Selecting a motivating dissertation topic is another instrumental strategy to sustain drive and work toward purpose (Martinsun & Turkulainen, 2011). Motivation and intrinsic interests related to the research process encourage students to stay driven (Martinsun & Turkulainen, 2011) and incentivize progress toward the student’s goals. Just as recognizing the purpose of earning a degree is key, understanding the purpose of a dissertation topic allows the students to claim ownership of tasks and regulate learning while they cope with natural, productive difficulties (Devos et al., 2017). If a student chooses topic because it may seem more marketable or easy to complete, the topic may not necessarily provide intrinsic value, and the student may risk becoming disengaged.

**Empowerment**

Empowerment is another indicator of a successful pursuit toward a doctoral degree. Dulay (1990) describes empowerment as developing recognition and understanding of one’s beliefs, which seems approachable. However, empowerment is complex and is often confused as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and competency. Empowerment is a process by which people gain control over something, such as earning a degree or overcoming a life changing event (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). New knowledge empowers students to contribute to the education field
through chosen research and analysis. The process should empower students to recognize and embrace academic identity, and eventually, identify as an academic scholar. Students develop and hone academic knowledge and skills, often through collaboration, reading, and writing. This increased development encourages students to challenge other’s ideas, give and accept criticism, ask questions, and be open to discourse (Lindsay & Kerawalla, 2018). These skills are built throughout the doctoral program and are key influences of empowering a scholar.

*Developing Empowerment*

Developing empowerment is a two-part process that includes a biological and a receptive component (Dulay, 1990). The biological component is part of growing in knowledge and skills. Empowerment usually occurs through learning by others who demonstrate empowerment. For instance, attending events and meetings with influencers such as researchers builds empowerment (Dulay, 1990) because empowerment is a learned process through communication and collaboration (Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016). Therefore, interactions and networking within a program also promote professional advancement and empowerment through greater access to resources (Martinsuo & Turkulainen, 2011).

The other part of empowerment is affected by how students receive a process or outcome (Dulay, 1990). A doctoral program places high value on positive feedback, high grades, and achievements. When students experience these accolades, they become a source of empowerment for a student to persist in the process. Thus, some may need greater support and collaboration to gain a sense of empowerment, depending upon their experiences.
Empowerment Influencers

Becoming a scholar does not happen alone. In a doctoral program, candidates are expected to be social and interact to develop professionally (Mantai, 2017). Engaging in a system of support assists in the demands of the program. Family, friends, classmates, and professors aid in this work.

In a doctoral setting, cohort models help develop empowerment between peers. In a cohort, a group of students move together through educational experiences, which fosters an empowering culture of support and collaboration (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Bonding with others who understand this level of academic experience offers fellowship, ideas, and direction (McIlveen, 2006). Supportive environments and socialization are encouraging, and coupled with collective sense of empowerment, help validate a student’s purpose, especially in times of doubt.

In the past, doctoral programs were traditionally held in person, yet many new options are available such as online and limited residency programs (Thacker, 2021). In an online setting, videos, discussion posts, synchronous classes, and other social media tools are used to bring the cohort together. A hybrid program includes classes that are virtual with a possible in person residency over the summer to build rapport as a team. Peer relationships are typically encouraged based on shared experiences of being a doctoral student. Although students embark on a solo journey of research, meeting together creates a synergy within a group. The group becomes a community of learners with a shared sense of purpose—to finish the doctoral process (McIlveen, 2006).

Mentors are another empowering force that drives doctoral students’ success. Committee members meet with doctoral candidates to provide expert input and feedback. This
explicit organizational structure of empowerment is directly linked to student performance (McCray & Joseph-Richard, 2020). For instance, the committee extends personal support with research skills and study design and pace student progress and timelines (McCray & Joseph-Richard, 2020). Seeking and utilizing all the support available empowers a successful academic pursuit (McIlveen, 2006).

**Persistence**

Students differ in understanding doctoral studies and rely on persistence to overcome challenges and barriers. Obstacles can lead to frustration, confusion, and self-doubt (Devos et al., 2016). For instance, a student without a clear or motivating research topic may struggle with direction and progress. Without an understanding of their path, students may feel uncertain, confused, and frustrated.

**Persisting Problems**

The ability to continually overcome obstacles within one’s life is persistence (Cross, 2014), and the rigorous doctoral journey certainly requires commitment and persistence. Persistence serves as a mind-set to push through negative thoughts, such as dropping out, that may stem from personal experiences, emotional exhaustion, depression, isolation, stress, and low motivation, which are common reasons for non-completion of a dissertation (McCray & Josheph-Richard, 2020). Individual’s emotions, feelings, and beliefs about oneself impact the development of a researcher’s identity (Mantai, 2015). Remembering a turning point into a researcher’s identity may occur at any time. Learning from former students’ experience about what has not been beneficial is as important as learning what has been successful.
Power to Persistence

Graduate school should be recognized as a struggle of cognitive demands and be accepted as a productive struggle (Posselt, 2018). Since programs vary in design, seeking a school that is reputable, competent, and meets individual’s needs and expectations takes exploration and time. Program types, structures, curriculum, expectations, and communications are aspects to consider while exploring school options. Once students enter a program, many of their questions still linger regarding the processes, procedures, and expectations in anticipation of the rigorous journey ahead. Mantai (2015) describes the journey as intense and transformative for the individual because each student undertakes such a profound learning experience. Comfort and confidence levels increase as students discover commonalities in their concerns, fears, and apprehensions. Committing to a doctoral program requires persistence to ensure success and completion. Since the research process is rarely linear, students move forward inch-by-inch with persistence toward completion (Mantai, 2015). Marking moments that require persistence as distinct thresholds of transformational learning and growing influences identity as a student and as a researcher (Mantai, 2015).

To earn a Doctor of Education (EdD) and become the holder of one of the most advanced degrees, completing a dissertation is required. Doctoral writing takes up a sizable portion of the experience in becoming a researcher (Mantai, 2015). Persistence is relevant for students throughout the entire dissertation process, a framework that guides student experience and includes choosing a topic, planning the research, forming a hypothesis, collecting data and evidence, analyzing data, and presenting findings. Persistence strategies will support the student’s process and will be tools to overcome challenges and setbacks that are likely to occur.
**Grit**

Persistence has been correlated to grit, which is a combination of passion and perseverance to accomplish a long-term goal (Hudson, 2020). Grit can be developed through intrinsic and extrinsic variables. Intrinsic variables include a natural interest, passion, or will toward something. Hence, when determining a topic for a dissertation, choosing a topic of interest increases the intrinsic value and dedication toward the work. Grit sustains interest over an extended period (Cross, 2016), so when students experience challenges, grit provides the momentum to persist. Extrinsic variables such as surrounding oneself with a culture of passion and perseverance also contribute to persistence (Hudson, 2020).

**Growth Mindset**

If a practicing scholar can demonstrate both grit and a growth mindset, doctoral completion is more likely. Grit is rooted in self-control and conscientiousness and keeps a person continually fixed on long-term goals (Cross, 2014). A growth mindset does not get bogged down in what is occurring now, instead seeks the yet (Hudson, 2020). Growth mindsets subscribe to learning opportunities and will remain engaged and influential in the process to obtain the goal.

**Conclusion**

Earning a doctorate in education is unlike any other education experience. A doctoral program develops research practitioners who may apply new skills to engage in action and advancement practices in the workplace (Lindsay et al., 2018). The intent of the degree is to provide professionals with the opportunity to lead change in an organization which takes purpose, empowerment, and persistence, and to form new identities as practitioner-scholars. Presentations and publications and informal activities such as reading, conversations, and aha-
moments contribute to identity actualization (Mantai, 2015). Following program completion, students’ identities as researchers become more productive, sophisticated, and validated through continued scholarly work (Mantai, 2015).

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Crossing Doctoral Thresholds: Purpose, Empowerment, and Persistence to Achieve an Academic Identity

Matthew J. Flugum

When a P-12 educator becomes frustrated with the state of the classrooms surrounding them, there are few options to drive change. They could isolate within their classroom and continue to focus on small sections of semesterly or yearly rotating students. They could connect and collaborate with other educators to support the growth of others. Or they could step outside of direct influence of students and into school or district leadership to multiply their impact on staff and students. Stepping out of the classroom requires this educator to continue to question their perceptions, which may dredge up doubt and questions about the effectiveness of practice. The presuppositions and solutions of one classroom are not the answer for all, and real change requires knowledge beyond what can be found in isolated experience. Further education is necessary.

Achieving a terminal degree, such as a Doctor in Education (EdD) maximizes the potential for impactful outcomes. The doctoral student’s journey requires undertaking rigorous tasks and accumulating the skills necessary to find, design, and implement the results of primary and secondary research. The successful doctoral student becomes an individual who identifies and addresses a problem of practice to provide pertinent information to stakeholders; the student then supports the impact of the change and furthers growth to desired outcomes (Lewis, 2020). Accomplishing a doctoral program requires a K-12 educational leader to transform from the role of a skillful practitioner to the role of practitioner-scholar. To complete the program and step into this new role, the doctoral student must rely on a clear sense of purpose, maintain persistence during a long journey, and accumulate the skills necessary to be empowered as a scholar.
The Purpose of Entering a Doctoral Program

The underlying goal of a P-12 leader beginning an educational doctoral program is to deepen their contribution to changing or solving problems of practice. The practitioner knows the frustration of a disorienting dilemma (Merriam, 2014) and recognizes a problem that needs to be addressed. The process of finding and applying a solution is no longer a first-person role intuited and flexible to the needs of a specific group of students. There is a new depth to which the practitioner needs to understand the nuance of the solution. Beginning a doctoral program is the next step to uncovering the purpose of becoming a person who is capable of contributing to scholarly discourse and eventually embodying the identity of a scholar (Nygaard & Savva, 2021).

Roles of the Practitioner-leader

A P-12 practitioner stepping out of the classroom into educator leadership undertakes a difficult transition. Leaving the confines of familiar territory, they begin to examine and support educators in differing contexts. No longer a direct expert focused on enacting personal solutions, the knowledge and experience of validated practices must be re-examined and adapted to fit new contexts. This identification begins the process of stepping into the identity of a scholar (Mantai, 2017). Classroom research may have been conducted with targeted and limited concerns, but the practitioner leader needs to understand and apply theory to multiple contexts, grade levels, and subject areas.

Content Reflection

Paired with the new task of widening the scope of research, the practitioner leader also needs to deliver and support the development of other educators. This professional development role might come in differing stances, but the practitioner will be more impactful when able to identify problems of practice and apply theory to formulate a solution. This
purposeful focus on supporting application of research-based solutions focuses on critical reflection on the present schemas of both the leader and the educator as knowledge of other potential solutions emerge (Mirriam, 2014). Their experience in the application of prior solutions reaches a point where they recognize a shift or transition is needed to resolve an issue. This transition crosses the threshold of engaging in scholarly study to gain a deeper understanding of the issues and nuance of application in multiple instances.

**Transforming into a Researcher**

The threshold a P-12 classroom practitioner needs to cross to begin to lead others requires defining the purpose of tackling the persistent problems of practice in P-12 education. To widen their understanding of theory application in multiple contexts, the practitioner leader develops skills to support adoption in new and unfamiliar classrooms. As initiatives are formed and implementation is attempted, this practitioner leader needs to develop new skills and focuses for the research that previously was completed with a single classroom in mind. Persistence in research and application represents the next threshold to cross and skillset to develop as the doctoral journey begins.

**The Persistent Researcher**

Uncovering a focus on the purpose for stepping into leadership and scholarly work is a critical first step in the redefinition of the practitioner. As the doctoral program finishes, the practitioner needs to develop tools that contribute to persistence. The doctoral journey contains experiences that will seem familiar to those used by the practitioner in classroom application. However, these research experiences will drive deeper into active scholarly work, which requires sustained attention and perseverance to integrate contradicting viewpoints and multiple rounds of revision. These experiences challenge both
the skills and identity of the practitioner to sustain reading, writing, collaboration, and promotion of the work in which they are so invested.

**Persisting in Purpose**

Focusing on a clear purpose will not only sustain the practitioner through classwork and the sacrifices required to accomplish the doctoral journey but will also provide motivation. When the emerging practitioner scholar is focused on the phenomena of interest (Rappaport, 1987) they will be more likely to maintain progress through transitioning through multiple experiences of motivation (Sverdlik, 2019). Continual connections to the phenomena of interest will sustain their motivation through curiosity to reach their goal (Shin, 2019). Keeping curiosity and their purpose of impacting education central to the process of learning, researching, and developing means to implement theory into practice. These challenges include writing multiple drafts and peer editing of articles and papers, reiteration of assignment intents, and attempting to publish. Group work collaboration with fellow students with varied interests and focuses working to accomplish a shared understanding.

**Approaching Presuppositions**

As the practitioner’s presuppositions are challenged, they also face difficult challenges to their identity as a leader. The transformation to a scholar capable of integrating theory into disparate content areas and grade levels requires prior learning challenge (Ralston, 2015). Where the practitioner may have already found a viable solution to the problems of practice in their own classroom, there will always be nuance to address. New issues in education, additional research to digest, and the incredible variance of learners due to rapid changes in society require consideration and further study. The practitioner turning
scholar needs to balance these external influences as they navigate the personal requirements of a doctoral program.

In addition to the presuppositions brought to a topic, personal influences impact the persistence of the emerging scholar. The practitioner-scholar must be able to balance time, energy, and finances with the professional need of objectifying what is often central to a professional identity (Burnard, 2018). The working professional element of many EdD students requires sacrifice and support. A practitioner working in leadership is stretched to meet reporting, training, and planning deadlines in addition to personal interests, all while maintaining positive self-care to support the student’s progress. Tools to support this element of persistence become paramount as the practitioner progresses through coursework and research.

**Tools to Sustain Persistence**

Three key tools contribute to the persistence of a doctoral student’s success. Identifying and applying areas of agency, intentional practice especially regarding feedback, and continued refocus on purpose represent key features of learning and growth. These tools support continued motivation to expand the exploration of options and acquire knowledge and skills. Agency allows a doctoral student the ability to focus course objectives to align with their goals. There are varying expectations of the program, course instructor, and dissertation interest. Maneuvering through these expectations tests the agency of the practitioner (Nygård & Savva, 2021). Finding common ground and using these variable expectations provides the skills an educational leader needs to balance the expectations of the educators they serve. These common threads provide an excellent exercise in clarity of purpose and goal. Intentionally refocusing uncomfortable collisions of expectation provides practice that drives continued growth as a scholar.
Understanding the processes behind theory implementation also requires metacognitive practice. Thinking through not only the content being studied, but also the ways in which the student approaches learning encourages drive and motivation (Hudson, 2020). It also supports the difficult shift to criticism of research (Tyndall, 2017) as an addition to application of theory. Varying attempts and reflecting on their impact on the practitioner’s efficacy ensures that the strategies used will support growth. Sustaining motivation and developing skills for successful completion of a doctoral program connects persistence with purpose.

A third tool to develop and sustain the persistence necessary for doctoral completion connects the practitioner’s thoughtful skills of agency with thoughtful practice. The successful doctoral student utilizes agency to connect purpose to course assignments and intentional practice to highlight growth. These actions tie to actions of perseverance connected with their passion (Duckworth, 2016). Maintaining momentum to completion purposefully revisits or redefines the early clarity of the purpose of approaching the program to ensure that interest is maintained to weather the dips and troughs (Åkerlind, 2017) of a lengthy identity transition (Nygaard & Savva, 2021). Critical to maintaining persistence is the capacity to critically assess the processes that seem second nature and improve to cross a new threshold.

**Process Reflection skills**

The threshold crossed in the development of scholarly skills progresses from thinking about the content of learning to the skills necessary for scholarly success. Agency, practice, purposeful reflection, and redefinition represent shifts toward process reflection (Merriam, 2014). Incorporating these new skills into existing schemas continues the growth in research and writing important to wider influence. This threshold is an important one
to the identity of an emerging practitioner-scholar as they continue to develop skills in research and application.

**Empowered Practitioner-Scholar**

Becoming a scholar is not a question of taking some courses and writing a dissertation. It is willfully entering into situations that challenge various aspects of identity to emerge fundamentally changed and belonging to a new community (Nygaard & Savva, 2021). This represents the stage of empowerment that is attained on the doctoral journey through the experiences provided in a doctoral program, and through the personal reflective practice of the individual. Emerging from the doctoral process empowers the student through deep study, sharing their thinking and application, and gaining the capability to design effective initiatives to shape education policy and practice. Doctoral programs initiate students into the skills required for empowerment through coursework, collaboration, and dissertating. The doctoral student needs to engage with the activities of a scholar, including publication, presentation, and implementation of research design.

**Community Empowerment**

An important step in the identity transformation to that of a practitioner scholar is to turn ideas outward. Though practitioner leaders conduct trainings and publish locally, the intimidating step to disseminating outcomes to a broader audience through engagement with a scholarly community (Tyndall, 2021) ensures that the student can take on the challenge. Their new identity as a member of the academic community includes publication and presentation (Nygaard, 2021). Through doctoral coursework and continued research into dissertation topics, the development of self-efficacy (Mantai, 2017) is realized and the practitioner deepens their capacity of utilizing theory and research to design, implementation, and study programs to impact others. This stage
empowers the student to develop confidence in their knowledge and application of theory and to continue to grow in the application, research, and study of the impacts of those theories. In this way the student becomes a master of the knowledge of their discipline.

Part of empowerment is the process of becoming confident and owning disciplinary knowledge. This ownership opens doors for the practitioner and lends further credibility to their skills as a researcher and allows for widening acceptance of multiple academic communities (Rappaport, 1987). In the case of a practitioner working through a doctoral program, the promise of this acceptance and credibility helps to focus purpose when the demanding art of research becomes overwhelming. To be able to uncover, clearly define, and discuss the impact of research-based initiatives fulfills a goal of the empowered scholar practitioner. This new knowledge and identity emerges and is formed through new experiences and examining the experiences of others.

Empowering through Equity

The practitioner’s experience as a classroom educator isolates perspectives to individual students. By stepping into a leadership and broader researcher/scholar role, the practitioner widens their perspective to include others they may not have previously known. The practitioner-scholar’s identity is experienced differently and individually based on the cultural background of the candidate. In design, application, and sharing of new means of implementation, the practitioner scholar’s impact widens to include and support other educators. Seeking out varied viewpoints and experiences enhances the effectiveness of design and research in connection with equity and meeting the needs of all students and educators.

Deepening understanding of the experiences outside of their own represents a final threshold. The empowerment of the
practitioner scholar through the doctoral journey leads to a final change in reflective skills. Having connected with content and process reflection, these additional skills lead to a change in the premise with which the practitioner views research and application (Mirriam, 2014). Emerging from the program, the practitioner scholar begins the process of utilizing the skills and knowledge gained through persistent research, and now leads through a wider lens.

Conclusion

Engaging with their purpose, developing tools of persistence, and identifying and owning the empowering experiences of a doctoral program supports practitioners capable of emerging ready to impact the practice of learning and education. Though difficult, the transformational process the practitioner undertakes through the process of a doctoral degree represents a shift in meaning making schemas and future production of the scholar-practitioner. These skills will not only support their accomplishment of the program and help them realize the purposeful identity they have crafted but will serve them to be successful in future roles working to implement change or reinforce strengths. To persist toward a purpose of developing empowered scholars, hope is a key. And with this intentional approach alongside the support of the community and faculty, the emerging practitioner scholar will find success in reaching their goal, one threshold at a time.

References


Purpose, Empowerment, Persistence and Doctoral Student Success

Erin Carter

Purpose, empowerment, and persistence may all impact the success of students who choose to pursue a Doctor of Education degree (EdD). Important to each of these concepts is the role of support among faculty advisors, cohort peers, and family. Strong support systems contribute to students’ empowerment and persistence in what can be a grueling and isolating journey. Purpose, driven by internal and/or external motivation, is another critical element to student persistence and feelings of empowerment. Therefore, support and empowerment truly define a student’s ability to persist in their program to earn an EdD degree.

Purpose

Graduate school education adds to human capital accumulation, provides access to prestigious professions and high social status, and offers professional and economic satisfaction (Xu, 2014-2015). Doctoral students in the field of education in the USA tend to differ from traditional doctoral students in that they are more likely to self-finance their education or are funded by employers, few have assistanceships, most attend part-time while continuing to work, classes are often at night or on the weekends, and the average time to completion is 8.3 years (Golde & Walker, 2006). Doctoral programs in the field of education are also much more likely to employ flexible delivery models that involve varying degrees of e-learning and distance study (Erichsen et al., 2014).

For EdD students, the rate of completion varies depending on the institution and program format. Bair and Haworth (2004) place the completion rate for professional doctoral programs between 40-60%. Over the past decade, researchers have
undertaken more systematic research in order to demystify the doctoral journey, and to make more sense of the networks, relationships, and supports necessary in the formation of scholars (Walker, 2008). When students in doctoral programs complete their degrees via distance delivery, supervision of graduate students becomes even more difficult for both students and supervisors (Erichsen et al., 2014). Having a positive working relationship with the dissertation chair is vital to students’ success (West et al., 2011).

During the doctoral journey, the learner should be moving from learner to scholar. As part of this transition, the mentor and mentee typically experience a transition into a more collegial relationship, moving from a formal stage of socialization to the informal stage (Gardner, 2009). This process takes time and must be accompanied by the appropriate level of scholarly activity by the learner in conjunction with appropriate levels of involvement and guidance by the mentor (Elmore, 2021). There are three types of support that can be provided by advisors to students in a doctoral program: instrumental help, psychosocial help, and networking assistance (Tenenbaum et al., 2001).

Erichsen et al. (2014) suggest effective supervisory strategies to use in doctoral programs primarily delivered in distance education settings. Some of these strategies emphasize communication between students and the supervisor, clear guidelines and expectations, quality and timely feedback, and supportive encouragement (Erichsen et al., 2014). Effective strategies doctoral students can employ to better work from a distance include networking, asking questions, familiarity with online resources, and self-discipline and -directedness (Erichsen et al., 2014).

Events and activities where doctoral candidates see themselves on the cusp of becoming the professionals they want to be, bring to the fore a diversity of significant moments that
constitute the researcher development (Mantai, 2017). Mantai (2017) describes three emerging themes of moments and practices when candidates gain validation of their growing identity as a researcher: (a) research outputs (formal), (b) doing research (semi-formal), and (c) talking about research (informal) (p. 640). Students’ agency and motivation to engage in strategies that align with their identities have previously been identified as critical factors in enabling academic possible selves and increasing personal influences on future intentions (horizons for action) with similar cohorts (McAlpine et al. 2014; Turner & McAlpine 2011; as cited in Mantai, 2019).

Participation in research groups and active engagement with research communities are critical to academic learning at the doctoral level. To facilitate the process of becoming an academic, Mantai (2019) posits that doctoral support needs to incorporate opportunities to learn and experience academic and general professional practice, mobilize student agency designing their developmental journeys, and connect students with academic and non-academic mentors. The importance of feeling validated as a researcher is highlighted through the positive emotions that underpin the experiences reported in researcher talk (Mantai, 2017). Emotional engagement is considered a key aspect in forming a researcher; in this context, it is the sense of validation that seems to drive, motivate, and support students when facing common doctoral challenges (Sinclair et al., 2013; Turner & McAlpine, 2011; as cited in Mantai, 2017).

**Empowerment**

Doctoral study is conducted at the nexus of intersecting power relationships (Brookfield, 2015). Empowering structures within a Doctorate in Education program could include students’ selection of a supportive, democratic dissertation committee, active participation in program of study, and formation of a cohort-lead advisory committee. A participatory approach to
teaching and learning is fundamental to sharing power between faculty and students in a doctoral program. (Humphreys, 2012; Jon, 2012; as cited in Scanlon & Hernandéz, 2014). Learning to work well in groups, being assertive, utilizing available resources, relating to diverse individuals, and maintaining a consistent academic focus are integral to the empowering process (Maton & Salem, 1995).

**Persistence**

In Canada and the United States, there has been a 57% and 64% increase in doctoral enrollment between 1998 and 2010 respectively, with women and visible minorities becoming increasingly represented across disciplines (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2013; Council of Graduate Schools, 2012; National Science Foundation, 2012; Statistics Canada, 2011; in Sverdlik et al., 2018). However, attrition rates from doctoral programs have remained consistently high in North American institutions over the past 50 years, with approximately 50% of students dropping out even while holding prestigious fellowships (Lovitts, 2001; Ministry of Education, Leisure, and Sports; Wendler et al., 2012; in Sverdlik et al., 2018). External factors affecting doctoral students’ experiences include supervision, personal and social lives, departmental support and socialization, as well as financial opportunities (Sverdlik et al, 2018).

Students experience graduate school in two distinct stages: 1) taking coursework, which is structured and familiar, and 2) dissertation writing, which is an unstructured process, that is often unfamiliar to students (West et al., 2011). Studies have attributed attrition and lengthy time-to-degree completion to a deficiency in students (Green, 1991; as cited in West et al., 2011). However, the solitary and unstructured act of writing a dissertation, for which many doctoral candidates are unprepared, may be a greater contributing factor (Garner, 2009; Nerad and
Social isolation plays a role in this transition as the learning process changes from a dependent participant learner in the course work stage to an independent and isolated learner in the ABD (all but dissertation) phase. Many EdD programs operate on a faster timeline to degree completion than Ph.D. programs; thus, students must make a faster transition from structured coursework to unstructured dissertation writing work (West et al., 2011).

Creativity is acknowledged to be a factor in the successful completion of a doctorate (Enright & Gitomer, 1989; as cited in Lovitts, 2008). It is also inherent in and integral to graduate education because graduate education is about producing the knowledge workers who ensure the ultimate success and survival of all the major institutions of society by preserving, creating, and developing the ideas, information, and technology necessary for them to persist and advance (Lovitts, 2008). According to several studies (Sternberg & Lubart, 1995; Amabile, 1996; as cited in Lovitts, 2008), three components comprised of six personal and social resources are needed for creative work: domain-relevant skills (intelligence and knowledge); creativity relevant processes (thinking styles and personality); and task motivation. Lovitts (2005; as cited in Lovitts 2008) contends that these same resources also contribute to degree completion.

Most students enrolled in EdD programs work full time and do not share the same climate of support as full time graduate students (West et al., 2011). The most important student-identified variables for the retention of non-traditional students are increased use of academic support services and higher levels of perceived social integration (Greene, 2015). Doctoral students’ perceptions of the role of support services in persistence is shrouded in a veil of ambiguity, pointing to the need for transparency among university and graduate program administrators, which may be achieved by making their roles explicitly clear to the students they
serve, and by promoting and raising awareness of the services they offer (Greene, 2015). Doctoral students’ perceptions on the role of support services revealed a number of factors exhibit a push-pull effect on the persistence decision-making process: financial considerations, the culture and structure of academia, individual characteristics, and the support of others (Green, 2015).

A line of research that holds promise to improve attrition rates of part-time doctoral students revolves around a sense of community between the student and the academic department (Zahl, 2015). Zahl (2015) proposed the following for faculty and administrators in academic departments to practice for support of the unique needs of this population and to cultivate a sense of community: include purposeful, supportive interactions with faculty; provide more equitable research opportunities for part-time students; plan/revise program structures to accommodate part-time students; emphasize the importance of peer connections (Zahl, 2015).

West et al. (2011) reported that time management and balancing life responsibilities were challenges that went hand in hand for most doctoral students. They also reported that balancing responsibilities was a challenge, juggling commitments to family members while trying to write their dissertation, life events as challenge, which included unforeseen circumstances in their personal life, and the need to compromise their personal relationships to meet the demands of the doctoral program as challenges to the completion of their doctoral program (West et al., 2011). In addition to time management, students’ success was highly dependent on their interactions and relationships with dissertation chairs (West et al., 2011). The more students experienced challenges along the way to finishing the program, the more likely they were to seek out support and resources to navigate challenges (West et al., 2011). Strong relationships with classmates and peers allowed students to remain resilient and
persevere through difficulties encountered in the dissertation process, as was having a positive working relationship with the dissertation chair was also vital to students’ success (West et al., 2011).

Individual characteristics or personal attributes may have either a positive or negative effect on persistence (Greene, 2015). Motivation, commitment, and interest are traits that are encouraging factors, while procrastination as well as challenges with writing and conducting independent research are seen as deterrents to persistence (Greene, 2015). In their study, Greene (2015) reported that the most important factor influencing persistence is the support of others – those both inside the university, primarily faculty and supervisors, and those outside, such as family and friends (Green, 2015).

The definition of persistence and success may vary between an individual and the institution. A student’s definition of success may be to persist in their doctoral studies until they earn enough credits for a desired pay raise or complete all Doctoral program courses, then choose not to complete a dissertation. Those scenarios may not meet the institution’s definition of success, as a doctoral degree was not earned by the student. A student can demonstrate purpose, empowerment, and persistence in a doctoral program without earning the title of doctor.

References


How Do Purpose, Empowerment, and Persistence Influence the Success of Doctoral Students?

James E. Hu Gammon

Unlike other academic pursuits such as bachelor's degree, Master's, and Diploma attainment, doctoral studies are much more rigorous as they require a high degree of personal commitment and sacrifice. As such, Mantai (2017) upholds that there is low completion of doctoral programs compared to other studies. The prerequisites to joining doctoral programs are also rigorous, including selective admission that is perceived to enable the candidates to show loyalty, time management, and commitment. Nonetheless, doctoral attrition rates continue surging despite the strict admission requirements and vetting policies due to ineffective academic, social and engagement policies, lack of perseverance, and remaining firm on the purpose of doctoral programs. Empowerment, purpose, and persistence as they relate to the principles of stoicism, may influence the success and prosperity of doctoral students.

Purpose

According to Nygaard & Savva (2021), individuals are identified by their expertise, epistemological perspective, and degree of research. Additionally, a sense of belonging amongst the doctorate students who form part of a specific professional, social, and personal community is critical for their “becoming”. Thus, individuals’ academic identity advances and transacts with other aspects of identity, including how people fit into the world and prevailing beliefs such as intelligence, creativity, and perception of introversion and extroversion. However, it is essential to note that developing a sense of belonging depends on personal identity and an environment where doctorate students find themselves and learners are never immune to such shifts.
Globalization is crucial for doctorate students in their journey to become coupled with the accompanying emphasis on the increased mobility and needs to undertake terminal degree programs in other countries (Nygaard & Savva, 2021). Travelling to other countries for studies is perceived as a public good representing traditional concepts associated with cosmopolitanism amongst the doctorate learners and international mindedness. Moreover, international students in learning institutions that provide incentives and financial resources to sort high tuition fees and sustenance support have been motivated, inspired, and committed to finishing their studies. In reminiscence, the UK remains an essential aspect of globalization. For instance, the nation has a widely spoken English language and accessibility to elites and internationally recognized institutions and Universities that make students from Anglophone countries pursue their doctorate degrees in the UK to meet improved job prospects and economic growth in their originating countries. Although having high-tier universities and international institutions never translate to high-quality education, students have been attracted to many of these institutions from all over the world since increased exchange value is crucial in the international job market. This aspect is similar to the principle of stoicism calling upon people to take action (Russon, 2006). Having identified opportunities, including high-tier universities that increase exchange value and employability, doctoral students, especially international students, are justified to prefer specific institutions.

Doctoral students are subject to changing purposes of the doctoral degree. According to Mantal (2019), the doctoral degree has shifted from being a license to teach in a specific discipline to training the researchers and educating students to meet the societal needs as depicted by the increasing demand for quality assurance, accountability, and auditing. Such shifts have created a dilemma on whether to produce candidates that carry their expertise directly
to the job market or doctoral graduates with discipline-based academic research capabilities. As a result, the professional doctorate (EdD) has come in place with the notion that former doctoral students lack practical experience, applied subject knowledge, and overall skills needed in the workplace. However, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) of Higher Education directs that students should undergo academic research training in their profession that augments their practice and deepens their sense of professionalism. Nonetheless, stationing doctoral programs within the university and variability in evaluating and conceptualizing education in institutions contributes to tension between the faculties and students. This difference occurs in how university programs integrate independent research, modules, and the formats of student variables.

In their quest to become researchers, doctoral students have experienced different purposes contributing to their attrition or consistency until they accomplish their studies at different intensities. According to Nygaard and Savva (2021), gaining expertise in conducting research in a specific discipline is crucial for all doctoral training. All learners are supposed to know how to define the study problems, develop a methodological approach, think critically and analyze the data, identify the literature, and produce argumentative writing. However, EdD students returning to higher education from the workplace may find it cumbersome to define simple concepts like research problems due to differences in approaching issues in work settings and academia (Loxley & Kearns, 2018). While practical orientation occurs in the research aims in professional environments, disciplinary-based research in learning institutions aims to contribute to the academic discourse. As such, EdD students develop the different purposes of educational practice and the academic world, an instance that challenges how doctoral students approach their studies. For example, doctoral research calls for sensitivity to ethics. Although many practicing professionals are acquainted with the ethics
pertinent to their field of expertise, research-based ethics may lead to new dilemmas that challenge some professional and ethical norms and are unfamiliar to EdD students. Since cultural and disciplinary ethical guidelines such as informed consent, anonymity, and transparency are developed within a given setting, doctoral trainees would develop tensions, burnout, and lose hope in their studies. Amidst these challenges, the principle of resilience, as outlined by stoicism, is helpful for doctoral students to anchor and manage such hurdles. According to the principle, individuals should accept the reversal happenings without a shock while making it grist for establishing better things (Russon, 2006). In this case, resilience challenges doctoral students to adapt to the ethical shifts in the learning institutions, become flexible and be ready to emulate new changes necessary to succeed in professional and academia.

Supervision and support are other aspects that shape the purpose of doctoral learners in their journey to becoming. Due to the ambiguity and complexity of the research process, supervisors play an active role in navigating and supporting the students through the unfamiliar territory (Dericks et al., 2019). The supervisor's supportiveness strongly relates to doctoral learners' success and satisfaction. In this case, timely provision of scaffolded feedback, quality supervision and engagement, and pointing out relevant resources for the students increase the independence and accountability of the learners. However, students that require high autonomy may feel dissatisfied when working with too hands-on supervisors (Nygaard & Savva, 2021). Similarly, when paired with a supervisor, learners with a strong dependence on structured support operate under a hands-off approach. As such, matching students' needs to supervisors remain critical and challenging, which calls for a crucial negotiation between supervisors and doctoral students.
Making choices and forging a path is another critical developmental process for doctoral students. According to Nygaard and Savva (2021), different university scenarios, including the students' cohort, supervisors, and classrooms, may bewilder doctoral learners. In this case, the anxiety revolves around the possibility of making sense of the conflicting messages, knowing the voices to acknowledge, and knowing vital individual agencies that are integral to building an identity as a scholar. Since study habits and what worked out for previous students in other disciplines may be ineffective for all the learners, doctoral students develop agency by coping with the stressors they encounter while trying to attain specific aspects of their identities. As a result, doctoral students should respond to the circumstances and choices made by other people while exhibiting a set of interactions with the social groups, their beliefs, and experience while responding to the pressure (Nygaard & Savva, 2021). Such students limit themselves to taking the initiative to challenge the expectations or adapting to the prospects.

Stoicism directs individuals to choose their responses by reacting to their judgments about events rather than events by making ideal choices (Russon, 2006). With these principles, successful doctoral students would learn to be sober, analytical, and able to make appropriate moves in contradictory and challenging circumstances. Thus, becoming a scholar involves taking specific courses and writing and committing to different encounters that challenge who they are and fundamental beliefs to transition to a new community.

Empowerment

According to Perkins and Zimmerman (1995), empowerment is a construct that links the natural helping systems, individual strengths and competencies, and proactive behaviors to social policies and changes. In this case, empowerment theory, intervention, and research integrate personal well-being with the
political environment. As per the theoretical perspective, the construct links mental health to the struggle to establish a responsive community and mental health. Additionally, empowerment considers strengths and weaknesses, competencies and deficits, and capabilities rather than focusing on the risk factors while exploring the environmental influences of social issues. From the views of empowerment theory, specific actions, outcomes, structures, and activities would be empowering (Sverdlik & Hall, 2020). Thus, empowerment incorporates collaboration with the rest to gain access to resources, achieve goals, and gain a critical understanding of the socio-economic environment.

The concept of empowerment is critical for the success or attrition of doctoral students. According to Mantai (2017), becoming an efficient researcher never comes through isolation. In this case, doctoral students relate with different individuals, learn with and from others, develop personal support networks (expert researchers and novice), and collaborate with the people in the research environment and beyond. Generally, a doctoral pursuit is a vigorous learning experience that is inherently social. In support, Dericks et al. (2019) uphold that social relationships in the university influence the professional development of the EdD learners and their success at the university. According to the principle of stoicism, this is also true that one is never entitled to do everything but choose the targets, partners, groups, and individuals to achieve the goals (Russon, 2006). Accordingly, the empowerment theory posits that individuals collaborate with their peers to achieve goals and understand the socio-economic environment. Since some doctoral students, especially international groups, pursue doctoral programs in a new environment and culture, collaboration with other people would benefit them in coping and familiarizing themselves with the environment.
Another critical aspect of empowerment theory is pursuing mental health and well-being. In reminiscence, Sverdlik and Hall (2020) affirm that various doctoral students are subject to psychological and mental health issues. Amongst doctoral students, Sverdlik and Hall (2020) observed high-stress levels, mental health concerns, insomnia, social dysfunction, isolation, distress, and alarming physical health symptoms. Such issues are caused by academic pressures and responsibilities, debts and financial issues, insufficient time, and work-life balance. To curb such challenges, doctoral students should negotiate for sustainable financial sources during their studies to meet tuition fees, and other upkeeps to avoid unnecessary stressors. While students are under the supervisors' guidance and directives, such instructors should show concern for the doctoral learners, including the family and personal issues that would hinder their success (Åkerlind & McAlpine, 2017). In this case, learners should make frequent formal and informal meetings with the supervisors, prompting them to give feedback on the supervision, focusing on peer support to limit isolation, and reflect on their progress.

Motivation is another vital empowerment source for doctoral students that they should negotiate. According to Sverdlik and Hall (2020), internal motivation includes valuing intellectual development, the need to acquire research experience, or the need to make a life change, and external motivation, such as prestigious status associated with completing the program and employment prospects. Self-motivation has proved to be an important aspect of becoming an independent scholar and fast adoption of university knowledge. To withstand the stressors of doctoral programs, students should be self-reliant by developing confidence that obstacles will be overcome, developing interests, participating in discussions, and feeling a sense of achievement. Stoicism's principle of virtue also affirms the sentiments while insisting that a meaningful life is full of virtue, happiness, service, and ethical behavior compared to pursuing pleasure (Russon,
By remaining happy and calm while undergoing unexpected encounters, doctoral learners would keep the zeal to sail through the rigorous program.

Moreover, autonomy is an important empowerment tool critical for the student's success. Autonomy implies the need for people to experience volition and choice of their actions. This is also echoed in Social Determination Theory (SDT) which upholds that psychological growth is a function where social context satisfies relatedness, competence, autonomy, and psychological needs. According to Sverdlik and Hall (2020), a high degree of support from the learning environment (peers, supervisors, and faculties) lowers the attrition rate of doctoral students while increasing their accomplishments. In this case, learners should undertake self-regulation by adopting behaviors aimed at obtaining rewards such as avoiding punishment, shame, guilt, monetary, and social recognition.

**Persistence**

According to Hudson et al. (2020), personal grit is paramount in making individuals become more prevalent and attain personal achievements. Doctoral students should develop a growth mindset as it is possible to cultivate essential qualities through efforts, strategies, and help from others. Since a growth mindset interprets challenges and failures on the road to prosperity, students would achieve endless pursuits. In developing a growth mindset, learners should increase their focus on the values of the process and embrace the challenges. In this case, learners should never give in to the present difficulties while remaining hopeful of anchoring future encounters. In this case, Åkerlind and McAlpine (2017) uphold that doctoral students should react to the challenges while excited while remaining sober, tolerant, and without fear. Additionally, it is possible to grow the trait of grit even when someone is reluctant to demonstrate perseverance and passion for completing the long-
term goal, including doctoral study, since grit levels are never fixed. Furthermore, stoics encourage individuals to become resilient by accepting the challenges and recover by making meaningful steps to avert future occurrences (Russon, 2006).

At the institution level, social integration has been used to motivate doctorate learners to enhance their accomplishments in the programs. By increasing the support to the students, Hudson et al. (2020) upheld that institutions would undertake academic and social engagement strategies, including designing online connection platforms, establishing community through cohorts, and having a support center for doctoral students. Universities should undertake maximum involvement of the trainees and learners’ integration. The primary foundation for this aspect is that highly involved individuals socially and academically undergo utmost interaction with the faculty and other students, leading to a spirit of perseverance and persistence (Mantai, 2017). Thus, improving student satisfaction and increased connectedness calls for a collaborative workspace and online portal systems, especially for doctoral students undertaking distant learning.

According to Hudson et al. (2020), applying determination involves showing a strong desire, engagement, and hope in pursuing a particular activity, including doctoral programs. While persisting, doctoral students have adopted grit - a combination of passion and perseverance. By remaining focused, individuals develop the synergy of personal and social responsibility, making the learners stay positive and determined to undertake initiatives, adapt to challenges, and grab opportunities as they ascend to their professional journey. Additionally, the majority of the individuals that have completed their doctoral programs have firm bases in their services, expectations, and life experiences, nourished and guided by their values and beliefs.
According to Åkerlind and McAlpine (2017), not all students want to undergo a research career. As such, it is necessary to foster enjoyment as a strategy for increasing the commitment of the learners to reduce their attrition. In this case, students should conduct a personal evaluation of research skills to identify their skills and gaps that require improvement as part of their professional development. Besides, learners would be motivated by valuing supervisors' feedback and doing robust enquiries with their colleagues, collaborating with colleagues, and demonstrating interest in the course of study. Motivation is significant as students miss course completion due to demotivation. Additionally, the approach enhances the students' faster problem-solution due to regular meetings with the supervisors that make them handle emerging issues affecting their studies.

The journey toward a doctoral journey is never a walk in the park since it is cumbersome and time-intensive. While doctoral programs appear unique, new, and frustrating to other students, developing a solid grip on the program's purpose and taking action per the principle of stoicism, learning to become adaptable and resilient to challenges. Appropriate supervision allows for the autonomy of learners significantly minimize attrition rates. Likewise, doctoral students face critical scenarios requiring robust options and choices to succeed. To successfully manage the challenges associated with doctoral programs, learners should develop self-empowerment through collaborating with their peers and adapting to the study environment. Other aspects of empowerment include autonomy of the doctoral learners, motivation, and obtaining stable financial sources. Moreover, doctoral learners should have a growth mindset and a spirit of perseverance to make them manage challenging doctoral programs.
References


Counselor: *If it’s ok with you, let’s discuss your history with alcohol.*

Client: *Sure.*

Counselor: *How old were you when you first became intoxicated?*

Client: *I’d say around three years old. Yeah, when my dad would have to watch me, he’d put beer in my bottle. After that, he’d lock me in the closet so he wouldn’t have to take care of me.*

Caucasian male, 63 years old

It is remarkable to reflect on what one person can endure in their life and still persevere in living another day. The above and forthcoming counselor/client dialogues are real-life examples of the formidable human spirit, despite seemingly insurmountable challenges. Each client, a person diagnosed with a substance use disorder (SUD), is an example of courage in the face of internal and external obstacles to their purpose, empowerment, and persistence.

In this essay, the author, a licensed alcohol and drug addiction counselor (LADC), reflects on her professional role as a source of empowerment and motivation to pursue a doctorate in education. Addiction is a multifaceted and maladaptive learned behavior that initially provides pleasure or the numbing of emotions (Ogilvie & Carson, 2021). However, once the brain develops tolerance to a substance, reducing or stopping use can be challenging, even considering damaging effects on one’s bio/psycho/social well-being. Using a psychological empowerment lens (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995), the author reflects on her clinical experiences with people recovering from
addiction as sources of purpose, empowerment, and persistence as she moves into the dissertation phase of her doctoral education program (EdD). Counselors need not look far for sources of internal motivation to complete such an advanced degree. Furthermore, for clients from marginalized communities, their road to recovery is impeded further by societal factors such as racism, homophobia, transphobia, and a lack of diverse representation and cultural competency of professional counselors. Indeed, clients are reminders of how to identify purpose and community, resulting in daily persistence in one’s personal and professional endeavors.

**Purpose**

Counselor: *Anything you’d like to process?*

Client: *I’m struggling with missing my son [three years old]. Last weekend when I went home on pass, he was hugging me and said he didn’t want me to leave again.*

Counselor: *You’re a good and brave mother. You’re here to get the help you need so you can help him.*

Client: *I know, but it’s just so hard. I just need to do this so I can get him back.*

The client is a 32-year-old Caucasian female.

Regardless of the professional identity of incoming EdD students, they have a shared purpose of attaining a high level of education for the betterment of their communities. Whether EdD students serves clients, patients, patrons, or students, their goal is to embark on a doctorate in education journey molded to their professional needs and personal passions. For example, a PK-12 teacher may choose an EdD program to vertically move into an education leadership role to bring her academic skills into the classroom to benefit her students directly. Likewise, a higher
MUSTFA

education administrator who is African American may enroll in an EdD program to gain a multicultural understanding of enrollment trends of Black and African American students. These doctoral students have a similar purpose but unique needs that must align with a high-quality doctoral program that transforms purpose into community betterment.

Despite having a definite purpose and potential for personal and career advancement, attrition is an ongoing issue in doctoral program enrollment. For example, despite a rising number of doctoral program enrollments over the past several decades, there is a 50% attrition rate (Sverdlik & Hall, 2020) with feelings of isolation as a significant contributor (Lake et al., 2018). Irrespective of their professional identity, doctoral students join a program they hope will provide a holistic level of support from their advisors and peers to align their purpose with their program.

As identifying a purpose is vital to doctoral enrollment, even more so is identifying an intention to enter a life of recovery for millions of people struggling with harmful alcohol and drug use. According to a study by the Recovery Research Institute (Kelly et al., 2017), over 23 million Americans resolved alcohol or other drug problem, with study participants attributing self-help groups and formal treatment as primary sources contributing to their success. In addition, according to a study published by the Center for Disease Control and the National Institute on Drug Abuse, 75% of adults reporting a SUD also report being in recovery (Jones et al., 2020). Therefore, experiencing support within and outside formal program settings is essential for moving toward empowerment and, ultimately, toward academic and personal goals.

**Multicultural Considerations of Purpose**

If the tripartite model of purpose, empowerment, and persistence exemplifies the necessary factors for completing an
education doctoral degree, then multiculturalism is the foundation. Ideally, multiculturalism is not a sidenote in any educational setting but a driving force behind every program and degree. Furthermore, if EdD students share a common purpose in improving their workplaces and communities, they understand the impact their research has on the lives of people from marginalized groups. In addition, a multicultural EdD program acknowledges systemic oppression and its implications on the program experiences of doctoral students from marginalized groups (Brown & Grothaus, 2021; Williams et al., 2018).

**Empowerment**

Counselor: *So, what is your longest period of sobriety from alcohol and meth?*

Client: *About 11 months.*

Counselor: *How were you able to achieve that?*

Client: *I was living with my aunt and uncle. I was busy watching my nieces, and . . . just being around my family helped. My parents are in Africa. But after a while, I got back with the same using crowd and then left.*

The client is a 28-year-old Black female.

Empowerment is a fluid force, never residing within one entity. Instead, empowerment begins with an individual and flows into that person’s relationships, whether that be personal or professional (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Eventually, the ripples spread into one’s surrounding community and finally into systemic levels, where they can either be refilled, left stagnated, or depleted (Sverdlik & Hall, 2018). Furthermore, empowerment occurs when an individual’s closest relationships and networks reflect their inner purpose. This reflection leads to goal setting and the creation of actionable steps toward those goals. A sense of
community catalyzes personal empowerment (McMahon et al., 2020). In other words, empowerment is extracting the inner purpose into an external reality. For doctoral students, a supportive network is essential to degree completion (Lake et al., 2021).

**Multicultural Considerations of Empowerment**

The empowerment process can be as diverse as the individual students themselves. Manifested in individuals, organizations, and communities (Zimmerman, 1995), empowerment must initially spring from a multicultural perspective. For example, in cultures that prioritize community over individual needs, a person’s sense of empowerment cannot materialize without the family’s support of the process. In other words, a varying direction of empowerment may be more relatable to doctoral students. In Figure 1, the author illustrates a multicultural approach to empowerment theory (Zimmerman, 1995) to conceptualize a diverse context and trajectory of process and outcomes. Finally, with a multicultural approach to empowerment, the process is just as valuable (if not more so) than the outcome.

The stream of empowerment is rarely constant. As with people in recovery, cravings come and go, and internal motivation fluctuates. Likewise, empowerment can come in with the tide and dissipate within days, hours, or even moments. As in society, doctoral students from marginalized communities face external and contextual threats to empowerment (see Figure 1) if they experience daily reminders from the society of not being seen, heard, or valued for their unique contributions. For example, Williams et al. (2018) studied the socialization experiences of Black doctoral students with their White faculty advisors. They found, “Not only was this faculty member ignoring her needs in an emotionally damaging way, but he was also setting the stage for feelings of powerlessness, distrust, isolation, and pain that
followed Connie throughout doctoral study” (Williams et al., 2018, p. 254).

One’s concept of empowerment is unique and serves the goals of that individual. For example, a person in recovery may empower oneself to set healthier interpersonal boundaries. At the same time, doctoral students find empowerment in their projected career advancement. Empowerment means recognizing these differing strengths and synergizing them toward the betterment of the community. Ideally, counselors work with clients to accentuate their strengths instead of focusing on their deficits. The latter would only exacerbate feelings of low self-worth and shame. Similarly, doctoral students excel when advisors and peers value them for their professional and life experiences (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Doctoral students and people in

**Figure 1**

*A Multicultural Conceptualization of Psychological Empowerment*

*Note:* This path model of multicultural empowerment was adapted from Zimmerman’s (1995) article on psychological empowerment and informed by Perkins and Zimmerman (1995). This path model illustrates a reciprocal nature of empowerment as including more
than the individual, progressing towards an organization, and finally, an outcome. Each phase of empowerment occurs within a broader society that has the potential to negatively impact the overall process of a person from a marginalized group. Recovery can merge purpose and empowerment to form persistence, which is imperative for positive outcomes.

**Persistence**

Counselor: *Addressing a group of 15 clients* Let’s share a short and long-term goal.

Client: *I now have a sponsor! And when I complete this program, I’m going to sober living while doing outpatient [treatment]. Then, in one year, I plan to return here and work as a tech.*

Counselor: *Excellent. I look forward to working alongside you.*

The client is a 56-year-old Caucasian female. She has been experiencing homelessness for the past five years.

Studies show that stress and depression are common factors in doctoral program duration and completion (Sverdlik & Hall, 2020). However, meaningful relationships with others experiencing the identical challenge direct the initial purpose and empowerment to the next phase of persistence. Such persistence is akin to endurance. For example, in an EdD program, a person has the initial intention to enroll (purpose). Then, through cohort models and core classes, she forms a supportive network of peers and advisors who recognize her unique talents and strengths (empowerment). Finally, after the optimistic initial stage of the program weens (also known as the “pink cloud” period in recovery), she relies on her peers to reinforce her purpose and nudge her along the antithesis of the primrose path that is the writing of her dissertation (persistence). In other words, persistence is the glue that holds purpose and empowerment together.
Multiculturalism and Persistence

Whether an advisor, mentor, or peer, studies show the effectiveness of stable social support in pursuing goals and maintaining stability (Ching et al., 2021; McMahon et al., 2020). However, systemic oppression can increase isolation and despair among marginalized groups in academia or recovery (Dorn-Medeiros et al., 2020). Additionally, there are disproportionately low numbers of Black doctoral educators (Brown & Grothaus, 2021). Program socialization that lacks cultural competency and diverse representation will hinder the invaluable component of peer support and result in a lack of program persistence. However, building solid relationships with mentors and peers aligned with multiculturalism increases goal achievement significantly for these students. For example, in a qualitative study of Black doctoral students and their White mentors, participants indicated that the genuineness and openness of their mentor predicted a positive academic relationship (Brown & Grothaus, 2021). In a different qualitative study of 14 experienced professional counselors, cultural humility resulted in more egalitarian relationships with clients (Zhu et al., 2021). Cultural humility is “a lifelong process of self-reflection and self-examination” (Zhu et al., 2021, p. 73). Undoubtedly, attaining a diverse faculty and using cultural humility in doctoral programs will create positive socialization experiences.

Multiculturalism invariably shapes the meaning of persistence for doctoral students and clients alike. Therefore, program staff of the dominant culture must strive for cultural humility when considering the needs of their protégés.

Conclusion

The very nature of an education doctoral program is the pursuit of bettering oneself for the sake of the community. This advanced degree continues to draw an array of practitioners from various
professional sectors, including behavioral health, higher education, library sciences, primary education, and special education. The purpose is the force behind the empowerment that prevails through an emic and etic motivation or persistence toward achieving a doctoral degree. However, persistence flounders in the absence of a culturally competent and supportive network of peers.

The author need not look for examples of purpose, empowerment, and persistence beyond the examples set by her clients. The counselor/client dialogues capture just a fraction of the voices of people struggling (persisting) daily to be free from a disease that disempowered them from a life of purpose. They experienced some of the most horrific trials a person can endure yet continue to hope for a better tomorrow. Where are their accolades for their persistence and bravery? People in recovery have earned an advanced degree in survival and life. The counselor and pending scholar rises and applauds.

References


Empowering Women to Find their Purpose and Persist in Academia

Kelli Snyder

Women doctoral students may encounter unique challenges on their doctoral journey. With nearly 90% of Speech-Language Pathologists (SLPs) identifying as women (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA); 2019), women who are SLPs, mothers, and doctoral students may face additional obstacles navigating their countering roles. Because of their flexibility and convenience, online doctoral programs allow women to integrate their professional, academic, and family identities (Denman et al., 2018; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Herring Watson, 2020).

A Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) is a typical terminal degree for SLPs (Tucker et al., 2020), yet over 50% of SLPs work in the education sector (ASHA, 2014). Therefore, a Doctor of Education (EdD) is an alternative terminal pathway for a SLP (Council on Academic Accreditation in Audiology and Speech-Language Pathology, 2020). Women, and particularly working mothers and Speech-Language Pathologists, may find their academic purpose through empowerment, which encourages persistence in an online doctoral program.

Purpose

The term mother-scholar (Abetz, 2019) unites the contradictory roles of being both a mother and a doctoral student, which may empower women to finding their purpose in academia. Upon entering a doctoral program, many working mothers examine how they will meet the demands of being a student and mother while continuing their career. They may question what they want to accomplish and why, and where the completion of their doctorate may lead them (Carter et al., 2018).
Many women enter an online EdD program with aspirations of working in higher education. Because relocation for doctoral studies is often not an option for working mothers (Rockinson et al., 2018), an online EdD program meets both their academic and personal needs. The flexibility of online doctoral programs may enable students to meet family demands (Rockinson-Szapkiw & Herring Watson, 2020) while they pursue their academic dreams.

Osmelak (2019) noted that most SLPs who pursued a doctorate degree ranked research interest, desire for knowledge, career change, and a desire to contribute to the field of Speech-Language Pathology as the most important reasons for pursuing the advanced degree. For SLPs seeking a career change and wanting to contribute to the field of Speech-Language Pathology, pursuing a tenure track faculty position may be their goal. Using their interests, background, and passions, SLPs develop an academic identity to find a sense of purpose in academia (Nygaard & Savva, 2021). In addition to driving their research interests, this identity development is influential in the likelihood they will persist to completion of their doctoral program (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2018).

As women’s academic identities develop, they continue to balance their roles as mother-scholars. Some mother-scholars are more deliberate with their time, effectively structuring time to maintain productivity and purpose (Abetz, 2019). Although some women noted difficulty establishing their identity in academia (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017), most women stated the importance of mentorship, particularly a mentor with shared identities, to support identity development. A mentor with shared identities can mediate the challenges a woman may experience (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2022) and support their academic identity development. Developing an academic identity or purpose only
takes place when a person sees meaning in it and intersects it with their other primary identities (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017).

**Persistence**

With attrition rates of doctoral students ranging between 40% and 60% (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2019), persistence is imperative to achieve a doctorate. As an increasing number of women navigate both doctoral programs and motherhood (Abetz, 2019), women may face unique challenges such as isolation and academic fatigue (Hudson et al., 2020). Persistence strategies may alleviate these challenges. One persistence strategy is student integration, which is the level of satisfaction with academic and nonacademic student-to-student interactions that occur during the online doctoral programs (Holmes & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2020).

A cohort model is a type of student integration, where a group of students begin and progress through the doctoral program together (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2019). A cohort model may lead to informal interactions with peers where they share knowledge, work together, and support one another (Denman et al., 2018). Informal interactions with peers help doctoral students develop a sense of connectedness and belonging to their department and program (Lehan et al., 2021) and build a sense of community and support that is imperative for persistence.

Covington and Jordan (2022) noted that among Speech-Language Pathology doctoral students, a strong student-to-student relationship and peer support was a predictor of doctoral program satisfaction and persistence. Mother-scholars attribute their success to their determination, organization, self-discipline, and positive relationships and interactions with peers and faculty (Lehan et al., 2021; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2022). A cohort model may allow mother-scholars to bond and form friendships with others of similar identities (Abetz, 2019), serving as resources for
students who are facing the same unique challenges (Lehan et al., 2021).

Another persistence strategy is faculty integration, which can be in the form of mentorship. Lehan et al. (2021) suggest a student’s relationship with their advisor and supportive faculty mentors to be critical to program persistence. The type of mentoring is equally important for women’s success in doctoral programs. Gammel and Rutstein-Riley (2016) noted that relational mentoring, which is more horizontal and less hierarchical, can lead to positive identity transformation and be mutually beneficial for both the mentor and mentee.

When considering the relationship between advisor and student, race and gender should be considered (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2019). Mother-scholars reported the importance of a mentor with shared identities, which can mediate the challenges they may experience (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2022). A mentorship between a woman who has successfully navigated her pathway to her doctorate and a woman currently on that path can provide a transformational experience and support finding her academic identity and purpose (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017).

In addition to student and faculty integration to support doctoral student persistence, academic-family balance is imperative to success and persistence (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2019). Often more familial demands are placed on women; however, family and spousal support can mediate these demands and decrease student stress (Rockinson-Szapkiw & Herring Watson, 2020). Doctoral students rely on personal relationships for support in achieving goals (Hudson et al., 2020), and students who successfully completed their doctorate reported the greatest perceived support from family, friends, and employers (Lehan et al., 2021).
Empowerment

Although faculty, peer, and family support are important to doctoral student success, personal empowerment, which is the sense of control and ability to overcome obstacles, is crucial for initiating, continuing, and achieving a doctoral degree (Lynch et al., 2018). This may especially be true for mother-scholars, as they struggle judging themselves positively in both professional and personal realms. To the extent they may compare to the ideal mom, they compare poorly with the ideal professional, and vice-versa (Abetz, 2019). For mother-scholars to be successful in doctoral programs, they must utilize faculty and student integration to establish their empowerment.

Rappaport (1984) stated that empowerment is more likely to be found in situations where there is true collaboration. Faculty and student integration may lead to true collaboration, thus leading to empowerment. Perkins and Zimmerman (1995) suggested that participating with others to achieve goals is a critical component of empowerment. Similarly with Speech-Language Pathology doctoral students, Covington and Jordan (2022) found that strong collaboration between doctoral students and mentors and faculty was key to student success, and thus more likely to lead to persistence and empowerment. “Voice is a powerful metaphor for empowerment” (Lahiri-Roy & Belford, 2021 p. 247) and mentorship between a faculty member and doctoral student can provide an opportunity for the student to find and share their voice (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017).

Conclusion

With high attrition rates, it is no surprise that completing a doctoral degree is time consuming, stressful, and challenging, and unfortunately many students begin and do not finish. The implications of these rates are immense, particularly for fields like Speech-Language Pathology where there is an acute shortage of
doctoral faculty (Covington & Jordan, 2022). The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) reported that between 25% and 40% of open faculty positions in the field of Speech-Language Pathology go unfilled (Covington & Jordan, 2022). Myotte et al. (2010) stated that doctoral level faculty are imperative in educating the next generation of scholars and maintaining and conducting research to advance the field of Speech-Language Pathology. Because of this need, it is imperative to understand what contributes to the successful completion of a doctoral degree.

References


Nevertheless, I Persisted…

Yanmei Jiang

Never in the author’s wildest dreams had she imagined pursuing a Doctorate in Educational Leadership until the onset of the pandemic. Glaring inequities in young people’s lives between her high-achieving Chinese-American children and her students from low-income families (especially those in culturally and linguistically diverse communities) were on full display every day in front of the author on Zoom. Aiming to figure out her moral and professional responsibilities for her students as an immigrant mother and teacher, the author joined the EdD program to find the leader in herself so that she could affect change from the classroom by addressing inequities experienced by people with multiple marginalized identities. The metacognitive knowledge acquired through the EdD program empowered the author to embark on a journey of discovering her voice as a leader in education by aspiring to be a Teacher-Scholar-Activist (Sullivan, 2015). The intellectual clarity and mental strength gained through critically reflecting on this ongoing journey motivated the author to persist in the program—for yet-to-be-discovered purposes and ways of empowerment.

Evolving Purposes

Miller (2005) famously asked, “Why bother with reading and writing when the world is so obviously going to hell?” (p. 16). “The dark night of the soul” for teachers of writing, Miller (2005) wrote, “comes with the realization that training students to read, write, and talk in more critical and self-reflective ways cannot protect them from the violent changes our culture is undergoing” (p. 5). English instructors face the challenges of helping students, through reading and writing, to understand and confront the violent uncertainties of the world, the inequities in their lives, and the educational practices that purportedly empower them with
access yet fail to consider their intersectional needs and challenges—whether the purpose is legislative, administrative, or ideological. The author joined the EdD program hoping to accomplish the following goals: to highlight inequities in community-college writing instruction observed by a linguistic and cultural outsider turned academic insider; to seek actionable solutions to inequitable practices in Developmental English; and to accentuate the discrepancy between people’s professed motive for equity and their inequitable practices (Ahmed, 2004 & 2012).

If witnessing the devastating impact of the pandemic on the lives of her students fueled the author’s desire to pursue an EdD, the seemingly mundane purposes that have emerged since the beginning of the journey keep the author motivated to persist in the program: from honoring her mother to showing her children the educational concerns she has as a mother and educator. Throughout the pandemic, the author realized how much her children had benefited from the “model minority” stereotype in their public-school education. The “model minority” was created in the 1960s to refer to Asian Americans as “a racial group distinct from the white majority, but lauded as well assimilated, upwardly mobile, politically unthreatening, and definitely not-black” (Wu, 2014, p. 2). Research has shown that teachers are more likely to send Asian American students to GT programs because of the “model minority” stereotype (Miller, 2019) and have lower academic expectations for black students (Delpit, 1995 & 2012). However, black students can rise to their teachers’ expectations (Delpit, 1995 & 2012; Vatson-Vandiver & Wiggan, 2018). Racial disparities in disciplinary actions are widely reported, which makes it even harder for black and brown students to succeed in school. The “model minority” stereotype also masks the socioeconomic disparities among Asian Americans (Bonilla-Silva, 2018) and deprives students of Southeast Asian communities of the academic support they need (Miller, 2019). Cognizant of her limited power and influence as a community
college instructor, the author realized that to do justice to the intersectional experiences of her students, she had to find the leader in herself to bring change to her classroom.

**Empowered and Empowering**

Participating in the EdD program has empowered the author to be creative and outspoken in her workplace and graduate school. Clapp-Smith et al. (2019) discussed how to adopt a multidomain approach to leadership development through which people “use experiences in all areas of life (e.g., work, family, friends, and community) as critical incidents to examine leader identity” (p.13). Reflecting on her educational and professional journey in her home country and in America, the author learned to unearth the leadership skills and ambitions she once had in her youth, developed those skills through the EdD program, and practiced them through her work as a Student Success Committee member and writing instructor.

**Leading from the Classroom as A Committee Member**

As a cultural and linguistic outsider working with a disproportionately large number of students with multiple marginalized identities, the author realized the importance of strategically exercising her agency in discussions on equity-related issues in DevEd English. Collins and Bilge (2020) emphasized the interconnectedness of one’s multiple identities and how they are impacted or conditioned by intersecting power structures in different contexts. Seeing identities as performative, this approach to intersectionality opened the possibility of agency for individuals who can strategically highlight aspects of their identities—while operating within the existing power structures—to exert control over other people’s perceptions of their identities. Tantum (2000) theorized about the complexities of identity, the dynamic nature of identity formation, and one’s simultaneous possession of dominant and subordinate identities. The author
decided to accentuate her identity as a tenured full-time faculty member with first-hand knowledge of working with a diverse student population in her committee work.

The author realized that the practice of “epistemic certainty” among white anti-racist activists (especially white women) regarding the needs and experiences of people from marginalized communities in DevEd led to systemic ignorance and dismissal of dissenting voices (Sholock, 2012). Students with multiple marginalized identities stopped existing for equity-minded, data-driven decision makers fixated on success numbers once these students withdrew or failed. Curricular and program changes, including expectations, and especially for DevEd English, continue to disproportionately affect students with multiple marginalized identities. Such decisions are often made by a majority population in higher education. For example, the author voiced her concerns over local changes, only to be dismissed by the dominant voice(s) that decided her perspectives did not fit in with the majority view. Siliman and Kearns (2020) demonstrated that “[e]xperiences of privilege are contingent not only on factors like race, gender, sexuality, and socio-economic standing but also on location and situation” (p. 49). Therefore, the author participated in state-wide placement meetings, collected relevant information at other colleges, and finally succeeded in pushing her colleagues to challenge white colleagues who behaved like “authoritative agents of knowledge” whose “epistemic confidence [...]is tied to racial privilege and global hegemony” (Sholock, 2012, pp. 706,708).

**Community Building through Tutoring to Promote Equity**

Participation in the EdD program has also enabled the author to promote learning and connection through building a multidimensional tutoring model and a student club that bridges academics and student life. In a nation divided by partisan politics and socio-cultural values, the community college English
classroom better represents the diversity and demographics of the country (Baime & Baum, 2016). Therefore, a writing classroom should be a place where people with divergent viewpoints, backgrounds, and experiences can build connections and achieve mutual understandings to affect change through reading, writing, and discussion (Galizio, 2021).

Lopez’s (2017) call on educators to address the challenges American society faced in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election rings even more urgent now than before. America today faces more challenges than it did six years ago: the increasing sociopolitical divide ripping the country apart (“Our Precarious Democracy,” 2022; Skorton, 2022); the raging global pandemic disproportionately impacting the already disenfranchised (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2021; United States Department of Education, 2021); and the conservative (regressive) agenda gaining momentum in American institutions (Carson v. Makin, 2022; Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization, 2022). Lopez (2017) suggested that multicultural educators should ground their actions in historical and geographical specificities to “outline specifics of [their] agenda, connect to issues in local communities, engage in rigorous research, and suggest policies that work to increase student engagement and achievement” (p.160).

Mentoring through the tutoring program can be such a space to bring students together and engage them in learning about the subject matter and one another—to inspire hope in a divided country through community building. Tutoring thus becomes a three-tier framework: the author mentors her tutor, who in turn mentors the students, most of whom come from marginalized culturally and linguistically diverse communities; the students, through working with the tutor and the author, mentor one another, as well as the author and her tutor, on their socially and
culturally situated knowledge and expertise. Learning and connections happen on all levels.

Working with these students, the author learned to be creative in curricular design, flexible with schedules, and strategic in instruction and assignment sequencing to expand the intellective capacity of marginalized culturally and linguistically diverse students. As Hammond (2015) demonstrated, to eliminate the achievement gap, educators should “think of culturally responsive teaching as a mindset, a way of thinking about and organizing instruction to allow for greater flexibility in teaching” (p. 5). By encouraging students to draw upon their cultural knowledge and experience in their academic work, the author builds multidimensional learning partnerships with her students with the support of her tutor to promote equity.

Bridging Academics and Student Life to Promote Equity

The author’s participation in the EdD program empowered her to be a leader in her workplace in ways she had never imagined before. Lopez’s (2017) call for spaces where “authentic stories of injustice, resilience and success to be told” through collaboration (p. 158) made the author realize the importance of foregrounding collaborative learning spaces so that people can become aware of the benefits of learning with and from one another—regardless of their differences. For example, multidimensional mentoring and tutoring practice gave rise to the Civil Discourse Club. Student participation in the club bridged the divide between academics and student life to promote equity and success among minoritized students (Syed et al., 2011; Museus, et al., 2018; Neal & Georges, 2020; Parisi & Fogelman, 2021) and foster an understanding of student success on multiple levels: individual, relational, and institutional. Regardless of the author’s progress at her home institution, there were moments when she questioned her ability and purpose to persist in the EdD program.
Nevertheless, She Persisted…

The author’s intersectional identities informed her purposes for joining the EdD program and impacted her (dis)empowerment as a Teacher-Scholar-Activist, which shapes how she has chosen to persist in the EdD program. Hudson et al. (2020) illustrated that practitioners should recognize that the lack of connection with and integration into institutional life presented a huge barrier to doctoral completion, so institutions should help students foster grit and a growth mindset through strategic programming to promote doctoral persistence.

Ironically, the two incidents that made the author almost quit were related to her profound sense of alienation as a linguistic and cultural outsider in the EdD program. Nygaard and Savva (2021) pointed out that recognizing the sense of liminality (intellectual confusion and frustration at the lack of progress) doctoral students experience can help those with marginalized identities complete the program. They rightly pointed out that for “the international student, and the mature part-time student, a broader understanding of liminality is essential: students not only struggle with their thinking and writing, but also grapple with ‘in-betweeness’ related to their cultural and professional backgrounds” (Nygaard & Savva, 2021, p.11). The author happens to possess both identities. When the author’s passionate (yet diffident) presentation on a pre-mature dissertation proposal developed a few weeks after the beginning of the EdD program was not received with professionalism, her motivation to persist in the program hit rock bottom. To build rapport with students, education practitioners should recognize “all aspects of [students] especially those culturally specific traits that have been negated by the dominant society” (Hammond, 2015, p. 77). Already feeling insecure as a cultural and linguistic outsider, the author felt publicly invalidated in a space where many people presented on DEI-related topics. The lingering effects of a profound sense of
alienation as an outsider in the program signified the collapse of a learning partnership, which is supposed to play an indispensable role in learning (Hammond, 2015). Nevertheless, the author persisted—not for the grandiose professional purposes of joining the program but for personal reasons of honoring her mother and demonstrating to her children that she could persevere through setbacks.

The second incident was the author’s struggle with the “University Theme Essay” assignment (Baule, 2022). She encountered unprecedented writer’s block. The author feared that the historical specificities of her culturally and socially embodied experiences would be effectively erased in a paper written in third person. The fear of losing her voice as a writer, compounded with the revelations from the state-wide equity training and two multicultural education courses during the summer, paralyzed her for days after the assignment was announced. According to Nygaard and Savva (2021), EdD students could feel frustrated when their writing style is valued in their profession but is considered inappropriate in the discipline of education. Second language students, regardless of their language skills, may be more likely to feel the effects of imposter syndrome and insecurities (Nygard, 2019, as cited in Nygaard & Savva, 2021). The author had two options: write a research-informed critical reflection paper in first person, a genre widely adopted in English, or quit the class or even the program. She chose the former because she had identified additional reasons to persist in the program: honor the memories of her dean, a white man who mentored her with respect and care; do justice to the time and intellectual energy her African American advisor invested in her through culturally responsive teaching; respect her veteran colleague, who helped her navigate a difficult summer in the EdD program with steadfast support and compassion; and stay connected to her cohort members whose support, wisdom, and strength she cherishes.
The author wrote the paper in first person and revised it in third person so that she could maintain her authentic voice while meeting the academic expectations of the EdD program. This was a strategic decision made to persist in the EdD program. On the one hand, she exercised her agency as an empowered EdD student to reject the “pastoral power” in education, which represents “modern methods of maintaining discipline and control” (Boler, 1999, p. 21). In doing so, she centered her journey in the EdD program—a journey located in historical specificities and temporalities and shaped by her intersectional experiences. As Nygaard and Savva (2021) stated, “Agency can mean choosing to adapt to expectations or taking the initiative to challenge expectations—such as actively engaging in self-identification or advocacy” (p. 23). On the other hand, the author demonstrated her willingness to fulfill the requirements of discipline-specific academic discourse. In a humble yet poignant way, this experience reminded the author of the hegemonic nature of academic discourse and how foreign and alienating it could be for beginning writers (Bartholomae, 1986; Rose, 1989). After having been the authoritative voice in her own classroom for more than two decades, the author appreciates this self-revelatory learning experience, which gives her a moment of identification with the very students whose intersectional experiences she endeavors to honor through her work as an instructor and an EdD student.

**Charging Ahead**

Participation in the EdD program gives the author the tools and spaces to re-imagine, re-envision, and re-position herself as a leader in education—to make educational practices more equitable for all students in a time of sociopolitical division and predicted economic downturn. The EdD program also helps the author understand her positionality in education and learn how to call out the tendency to dismiss the socially situated and embodied
experiences of people with marginalized identities as valid knowledge in education (Harding, 1993 & 2015; Sholock, 2012).

Moving forward in her EdD program, the author should continue to heed her intersectional experiences, perspectives, needs, and strengths to exercise her agency as a doctoral student who happens to be a Teacher-Scholar-Activist. With neither administrative nor scholarly ambitions for an EdD degree at this point, the author will continue to focus on her work of teaching students from diverse backgrounds, so that she can lead in and from the classroom with more assertion, awareness, and confidence—even when her perspectives are questioned or dismissed as invalid or non-representative. Being in an EdD program where she is one of the few visible “outsiders” reminds the author of the importance and urgency of building rapport and alliance with all her students because she knows how alienating it can be in the absence of a learning partnership. Every student brings their own “diversity” into the classroom and is entitled to a supportive and welcoming learning environment.

New purposes for persisting in the EdD program will emerge. New ways of empowerment will become evident as the author’s journey continues. New setbacks will occur. Nevertheless, she will persist.

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Balancing Plates and Juggling Balls: The Academic Lives of Female Scholars

Katey R. Leversion

Academia continues to be masculinist and heteronormative, a male-dominated game in which rules inadvertently exclude or marginalize females and those with a family (Caretta et al., 2018). Balancing family responsibilities, employment, and mothering with doctoral-level studying as a female student is an empowering, fulfilling, and life-changing experience. However, juggling a busy career with family life and study is profoundly challenging, leaving female students with unique and multifaceted stressors not often experienced by their male counterparts (Webber, 2017). More specifically, female students, and those with a family, face three distinct barriers to completion: imposterism, conflicting role demands, and psychological stressors. Institutions have the responsibility to empower female academics to tell their story, to encourage them to serve an inspirational example, to provide mentorship for female students, and to continue to challenge inequality found within and beyond academia.

An Empowering, Purposeful Experience

Doctoral education is an empowering space that has the potential to impact the development of a sense of agency, helping students to find their voices and identities as researchers (Dann et al., 2019; Webber, 2017). The purpose of doctoral education varies from the narrow lens of simply meeting learning outcomes to a acquiring a wider collection of critical skills, including social networking, communication, executing research, and entrepreneurialism (Loxley & Kearns, 2018). Female students in particular report a multitude of reasons to pursue and persist in their attainment of a doctoral degree, from the pragmatic (career advancement) to the psychological (achievement of personal
goals) (Brown & Watson, 2010; Webster et al., 2021). Like all students, their sense of purpose is rooted in opportunities for enhancing identity, a quest for knowledge, intrinsic interest, love of learning, emotional investment, and intellectual challenge. However, in a monograph study of female educators, Webster et al. (2021) found the pursuit of a doctoral degree was an opportunity to do something for oneself, a chance to “prove to themselves that this type of achievement was possible” (p. 799). As one female student stated during an interview conducted by Brown and Watson (2010), earning a doctorate was a defiant challenge to the gender socialization of a culture that aimed to pigeon-hole girls into specific roles.

Successfully completing a doctoral degree is a powerful accomplishment, particularly for a female student. Research has indicated that meaningful social identities can emerge from the experience. Through coursework that encourages critical thinking in one’s area of study, facilitates deeper approaches to learning, and promotes scholarly advancements, students will likely form identities as practitioners, scholars, and leaders in their fields (Ysseldyck et al., 2019). It is important to note that females are less likely to have doctorates than male colleagues, even in traditionally female-dominated fields such as humanities and education, and the number of females completing, holding tenure or tenure-track positions, and employed as full professors becomes more disproportionate with each step and advancement (Brown & Watson, 2010; Caretta et al., 2018; Webster et al., 2021). Despite this “leaky pipeline” (Webster et al., 2021), there are several examples in empirical research and applied studies of the increased leadership ability of females. By investing in the doctoral education of female students and playing a key role in supporting their growth, institutions can advance female educators and promote female leaders that are ready to implement meaningful leadership strategies (Webster et al., 2021).
The Battle with Barriers to Persistence

The traditional expectation that there will be no life outside of study, combined with an estimated time commitment of 60-70 hours per week, and the high financial cost, leaves completing a doctoral program a formidable experience for any student (Webster et al., 2021). In fact, it is well documented that degree completion is low and student attrition is high across U.S. doctoral programs. The Council of Graduate Schools recently reported national averages of completion topping out at 60% or less across all fields (Posselt, 2018). The daunting task of earning a doctorate is further exacerbated by persistent realities uniquely experienced by female students and students who are parents.

Barriers to completion experienced by female students and student parents include imposterism, conflicting role demands, and psychological stressors. The pressure to work as though you are not a parent, parent as though you do not work, and study as though you are neither employee nor parent is an impossible and harsh reality many female doctoral students face as they juggle academic with their working lives and the needs of their families. The decision to continue, to persevere, is a daily, intentional, and difficult choice (Webster et al., 2021), which may compound the sensation of imposterism.

Imposterism

An expectation of doctoral education is that students will push the frontiers of knowledge, become stewards of the discipline, generate new and valuable ideas, and be a critical leader among peers. Posselt (2018) posits that what makes doctoral education notoriously challenging and promotes feelings of imposterism is the combination of increasingly high expectations placed on students while reducing the supports offered by their professors and peers. Originally coined by Clance and Imes (1978), Imposterism, or Imposter Syndrome, is defined
as the tendency of high achievers to experience self-doubt and chronically feel inadequate, even in the face of repeated successes (Cusack et al., 2013). Any success is typically attributed to external factors, such as luck, rather than a demonstration of internal factors, such as skill and competence (Cusack et al., 2013). Several environmental threats can prompt a student to call into question her belonging and ability to succeed, including experiences of peer comparisons, insufficient support, feelings of isolation, and perceived competition. Compared to their male counterparts, female students are at a significantly higher risk for experiencing imposterism, which comes at a significant cost to psychological well-being (Cusack et al., 2013; Posselt, 2018).

The restrictive social role ascribed to females is built upon culturally constructed ideas of gender, which for many female students leads to feelings of low self-efficacy, fear, and uncertainty. Experiences of sexism, particularly, directly exacerbate imposterism and often motivate female students to consider leaving their doctoral program, the actual odds of which are 21 times greater than if they considered leaving for any other reason (McGrath Cohoon et al., 2009; Posselt, 2018). The following quotes from interviews conducted by Webster et al. (2021, p.798) are powerful examples of the imposterism commonly experienced by female doctoral students:

“I was told that women should not be doctors, lawyers, leaders, or PhDs. That it was not my place in society.”

“I tried to stay positive by visiting with friends, family, and colleagues. I was really struggling internally with doubt. I doubted my ability first as a grad student, then researcher, and scholar. I was surrounded by so many amazing and super-smart people… I was always wondering and questioning if I really had the ability to be a doctor.”
“My strong inner voice was screaming at me that as a women I did not have the knowledge and skills to successfully complete a dissertation. Who did I think I was to continue on this difficult academic path?”

It is critical to hear directly from those who face the barriers themselves, to give voice to female experiences. Research has shown that direct accounts can provide insight, foster empathy and compassion, and be an important tool that helps address the issue (Haffey & Rowland, 2015).

Conflicting Role Demands

Even now, in the 21st century, females are often still disproportionately responsible for regulating the emotional and caregiving needs of their families, which can be exhausting and lead to significant tension and overwhelming stress for those juggling work and student responsibilities. There may be significant emotional costs to prioritizing academic over familial demands. In fact, research clearly suggests that females’ professional academic careers suffer because of their roles as wife and mother, something that is not reciprocally experienced by male academic professionals (Brown & Watson, 2010; Caretta et al., 2018; Webber, 2017; Webster et al., 2021). So great is the pressure brought on by these multiple demands that major disadvantages are evident, such as significant delays in doctoral education, a reduction in research productivity, and a reduced likelihood of being published during their doctorates than male candidates.

Psychological Stressors

Female students are especially vulnerable to stress as they strain to manage competing demands of caregiving, work, and school; yet, they sometimes hide struggles due to societal expectations and perceived hierarchical relationships in the doctoral program (Ayala et al., 2017; Webber, 2017). For these
students, the path to completion can be lonely and isolating. In addition to substantially higher levels of stress and feelings of isolation, compared to other populations, Ayala et al. (2017) found evidence of lower self-care and overall lower quality of life. It is well documented throughout the literature that there are significantly negative consequences of stress, including poor physical health, family difficulties, disrupted sleeping patterns, increase alcohol consumption, decreased social interaction, and increased risk for depression. Issues unique to female students, such as pregnancy and postpartum depression, however, continue to be inadequately addressed in higher education, further exacerbating their vulnerability to stress and its negative consequences (Ayala et al., 2017). The lack of visibility of females in similar situations could foster additional feelings of isolation, overall compounding the distinct stress experienced by this population of students.

Parents of dependent children experience a range of emotions while enrolled in higher education, from happiness and self-fulfillment to the most reported emotion of guilt (Brooks, 2015). Though guilt was a commonly reported theme among student-mothers, it was only mentioned by one of the ten student-fathers. This guilt is typically associated with beliefs about inadequacy in terms of time spent caring for children and an inability to continually juggle multiple demands successfully. From modern theories on attachment to the mother promoted in the media, the idea of what constitutes a good mother continues to intensify.

Within the social landscape, parents – and particularly mothers – are expected not only to ‘be there’ for their children, but also to facilitate their participation in a wide range of activities…[and] spend a significant amount of time, energy, and money raising their children (Brooks, 2015, p. 511).
Feelings of guilt will inevitably heighten as the responsibility for a child’s outcomes is placed on the shoulders of a mother as she simultaneously juggles employment and studying. Feelings of being torn in two are common as females balance the competing goals of investing in their own identity as a lifelong learning and being, according to the deeply engrained, socially constructed ideal of a “good mother” (Brooks, 2015; Webber, 2017).

A Multi-Faceted Approach to Supportive Solutions

Managing the realities of juggling doctoral, work, and family obligations can be challenging, however, admitting to it can be equally, if not more, difficult. It is the responsibility of both the faculty and institution to see students holistically rather than just academically, even at the doctoral level, as establishing supportive mechanisms for female students can make all the difference in their path towards successful completion (Caretta et al., 2018; Webber, 2017; Webster et al., 2020).

Given the “collaboratively constructed and historically situated” nature of the unique barriers female students face, it is critical to normalize the struggle, to make such experiences visible, and to voice the adverse impacts (Brooks, 2015, p. 517; Caretta et al., 2018). Webster et al. (2020) recommends institutional leadership establish safe spaces for educators to have open conversations about experiences and fears, following up with support needed to address concerns. In addition, institutions could facilitate connections and create platforms for mothers to discuss commonalities among their experiences, overall reducing feelings of isolation and empowering students to face challenges collectively (Misra, 2019; Webster et al., 2020). Given the established relationship between self-care and quality of life, institutions and faculty supervisors should direct energy towards monitoring student stress levels and should implement programming aimed at reducing perceived stress (Ayala et al.,
Lastly, programs should rethink traditional norms and practices. Offering and encouraging flexible scheduling and deadlines, as well as providing resources and roadmaps for navigating the program, can minimize the challenges uniquely faced by some students.

As professionals pursuing the prestigious level of a doctoral degree, students often pride themselves on being self-reliant and, therefore, understand their own personal responsibility to demonstrate resiliency and manage challenges (Webber, 2017). However, seeking acknowledgement and empathy was a common theme throughout interviews with female doctoral students (Brown & Watson, 2010; Posselt, 2018; Webber, 2017). Within the boundaries of a non-hierarchical relationship, a faculty mentorship can offer a durable structure of individualized support aimed at meeting specific needs of the student, and potentially offset stress and feelings of inadequacy (Brown & Watson, 2010; Posselt, 2018). Upon completion of their own doctoral journey, a female practitioner and scholar should feel empowered to serve as a mentor themselves, acting as a source of much needed validation, which combats imposterism and disrupts self-doubt. Relationships such as this help future generations of students navigate the unique challenges they may face and are important to inspiring the next generation of leaders. A sense of belonging is critical for fighting the discriminate barriers and circumstances that influence a female’s decision to leave academic life (Ysseldyk et al., 2019). Through empathy from both the institution and faculty mentors, female students can feel understood and supported and blaze that formidable trail towards successful completion of the doctorate degree.

**Conclusion**

Earning a doctorate degree can be a pathway to purpose, empowerment, and an important sense of identity for females in academia. However, as they face unique barriers to completion,
institutions and faculty mentors have a responsibility to take significant steps towards reducing those barriers and giving voice to the experience of those affected. Provided with a platform, female practitioners and scholars can share their history of academic success and contributions, career goals, and mutual concerns regarding work-life balance and family demands. “Importantly, however, this should not be on the shoulders of postdocs alone; instead, institutional culture change – from the individual to the ivory tower – must occur in order to promote a sense of inclusion and respect for (and among) women” (Ysseldyk et al., 2019, p. 14). Building upon the findings of current research, future scholars have the distinct opportunity to examine additional key aspects of the academic life of females, such as academic discipline and specific doctoral program.

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From Deficit to Asset: The Persistence of First-Generation Doctoral Students

Jenna K. Ladd

Doctoral candidates rely heavily on scholarly socialization to develop their identity as practitioner scholars and persist to completion of the doctoral process (Sverdlik et al., 2018). Supervisor-supervisee and peer-to-peer socialization are especially essential for first-generation students who may lack an understanding of unspoken social norms in higher education (Gardner, 2013). Thirty percent of doctoral candidates are first-generation students (Mitic, 2022) yet little research has explored the experiences of this population in doctoral programs. First-generation doctoral students leverage personal and professional purpose to increase feelings of empowerment and, ultimately, persist in the doctoral pursuit. Although many enter programs with social and financial capital deficits, first-generation doctoral students leverage their sense of purpose and the resilience they have developed over a lifetime to finish a terminal degree.

Who are First-Generation Doctoral Students?

The term first-generation college student was originally coined by Fuji Adachi in 1979 (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). Adachi defined this population as a group of students who do not have at least one parent with a bachelor’s degree. Since then, the criteria for qualifying as a first-generation student (FGS) has shifted. At present, FGS refers to college students whose parents have completed some secondary education, a high school diploma, or less (Parcarella et al., 2004).

First-generation undergraduate students are less likely than continuing-generation peers to enroll in and complete graduate education programs (Engle & Tinto, 2008). When they do enroll in graduate education, they are most heavily represented
in fields of study related to education and least likely to pursue doctoral degrees in the humanities (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Doctoral students from first-generation families can also be described by their demographic characteristics. Hispanic or Latino and American Indian or Alaskan Native students make 52 percent and 51 percent of first-generation doctoral students, respectively (Council of Graduate Schools, 2022), while Black or African American students make up another 41 percent of first-generation doctoral students (Council of Graduate Schools, 2022). Non-U.S. citizens make up another large proportion of first-generation doctoral students at 29 percent of the total FGS population (Council of Graduate Schools, 2022).

Barriers to completion for first-generation students of color are likely compounded by systemic racism in higher education. Nagbe (2020) notes that Black doctoral students report feeling most marginalized during key socialization experiences for degree completion, such as faculty mentorship and professional development. The experiences of Chicano/Latino(a) doctoral students mirror these findings. Chicano/Latino(a) students reported receiving less access to professional development opportunities and faculty mentorship than their white peers (Ramirez, 2017). Although all FGS face challenges in pursuit of a terminal degree, the intersection of first-generation status and race present additional challenges for students of color.

**Power through Purpose**

Prior to exploring why FGS persist in their doctoral studies, it is important to understand what motivates them to begin the doctoral process in the first place. Doctoral candidates derive their sense of purpose for pursuing a terminal degree from extrinsic or intrinsic sources (Sverdlik et al., 2018). Intrinsic motivation can be understood as doing an activity for its inherent satisfaction, while extrinsic motivation is the desire to do
something to achieve an outcome (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Leonard et al. (2005) found that most doctoral candidates pursue a degree mostly for internal reasons. Intrinsic motivators, particularly for those enrolled in practitioner doctoral programs, include increasing one’s sense of capability, boosting confidence, and a genuine enjoyment of learning (Kowalczuk-Walędziak et al., 2017). Extrinsic motivators for pursuing a doctorate might include advanced employability, increased salary prospects, or elevated social status (Sverdlik et al., 2018).

Professional advancement and increased salary prospects post-graduation are especially strong motivators for first-generation doctoral students. On average, FGS carry much more student loan debt when entering doctoral programs (Mitic, 2022). The Council of Graduate Schools (2022) found that education-related debt for FGS entering doctoral programs was 65 percent higher than continuing-generation peers. They are also less likely to have access to assistantships, grants, or fellowships to fund their studies (Hoffer et al., 2002). This disparity is compounded for Black and Latino doctoral students who are likely to owe much more in student loan debt upon graduation than their White and Asian counterparts (Webber & Burns, 2022). Given the economic burden first-generation doctoral students carry, it is no surprise that they rate job security, salary, and benefits as more important motivators for degree completion than their peers from continuing-generation families (Mitic, 2022).

While extrinsic motivators are practical, intrinsic drive is often more helpful on the path to doctoral completion. Although research about first-generation doctoral student’s intrinsic motivation is sparse, several studies have found intrinsic motivation to be the strongest predictor of doctoral degree completion (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Zhou, 2015). Saava (2021) posits that this is because doctoral programs tend to be less
structured than undergraduate and graduate programs, and the dissertation process is largely independent in nature.

Dissertation research and publication is the cornerstone of the doctoral candidate’s experience. First-generation doctoral students may also draw a sense of purpose from contributing new ideas to professional literature through dissertation work. Historically, women and scholars of color have been offered fewer opportunities to publish scholarly research (Millet & Nettles, 2006), so there is a dearth of research representing the interests and issues of importance to these communities. Particularly in practitioner-scholar doctoral programs, individuals may evoke purpose from answering new and personally meaningful research questions with concrete implications for practice. In their review of personally relevant research topics related to child sexual abuse and sex trafficking, Jones and Bartunek (2021) note that a practitioner-scholar’s personal connection to a topic may engender a sense of self-fulfillment when their projects raise awareness and generate solutions.

Persistence: The Importance of Scholarly Socialization

Students are expected to complete doctoral programs, from required course work to a dissertation defense, in as little as two to three years (“Educational Doctorate,” 2022). This journey is time-intensive and arduous, resulting in a 50-70 percent attrition rate in doctoral programs (Rigler et al., 2017). Doctoral supervisors play an integral role in maintaining students’ motivation and positive emotions throughout the course of study, which is critical to persevering to completion (Lepp & Remmik, 2016). Many studies have shown that an appropriate match between supervisor and student significantly influences students’ persistence in and emotions about their doctoral studies (McAlpine & McKinnon, 2013; Leijen et al., 2016).
Although first-generation students may enter programs at a socialization deficit, appropriate supervisor-student fit and intentional program structure can help mend the gap. Supervisors and university leaders can foster FGS’s sense of belonging and, thereby, their persistence and empowerment, through explicit mentoring and program design (Gardner, 2013). Supervisors are often tasked with socializing students as academics, guiding dissertation research and writing, helping them navigate university systems, and learning professional norms around collaboration. This support is especially important during students’ transition into and out of doctoral programs (McAlpine & McKinnon, 2013).

Gökçe (2020) writes that “Professional socialization is an ongoing social structure, includes internalization of values and norms of that construction by active learning, and results in the development of professional identity” (para. 5). This process is longitudinal, and over the course of study, students develop a deeper understanding of the professional norms related to scholarly collaboration, research, and publication. First-generation doctoral candidates frequently enter programs at a disadvantage related to professional socialization. Lovitts (2001) defines the internal understanding of social and institutional rules that help individuals make sense of their environment as “cognitive maps”. Cognitive maps are created and shared among members of a community or institution (Lovitts, 2001). They are often constructed using experiences from family of origin, during primary and secondary education, and finally, during undergraduate studies.

First-generation students are likely to have a less detailed “cognitive map” of higher education. To begin, by definition, many grew up in homes where neither parent completed a bachelor’s degree (Parcarella et al., 2004). In comparison to their continuing-generation peers, FGS’s families likely lack useful
inter-generational knowledge and social capital related to navigating graduate educational systems (Gardner, 2013). First-generation doctoral students are also more likely than their peers to have studied at community colleges or universities which do not offer doctoral programs (Hoffer et al., 2002). These differences in background can evoke strong feelings of “otherness” among FGS. In a qualitative study by Holley (2013), one student explained:

I sit in class and listen to the other students and think that these people know this stuff because they get it from their parents and I’m like the pioneer out there with my little wagon, not always knowing what I’m doing. But I’m doing it anyway (p. 50).

To foster FGS’s persistence, it is essential that doctoral programs feature many opportunities to engage in meaningful scholarly socialization. This population of students should be afforded opportunities to participate in program orientation, to access a detailed program handbook, and to engage in one-on-one mentoring relationships with students further along in their degrees (Gardner, 2013).

**First-generation Assets: A Source of Empowerment**

The identities and experiences of first-generation doctoral students extend far beyond a deficit-based framework. Using an asset-based approach, FGS can be understood by the strengths they bring to a program. Broadly, an asset-based approach to education understands that diversity in background, thought, and culture contribute positively to everyone’s learning experience (New York University, 2022).

Holley and Gardner (2012) found that a large proportion of first-generation doctoral students attributed their success in doctoral studies to their background. At the undergraduate level, FGS are more likely to be considered low-income, female, have a
disability, be financially independent from their parents, have dependent children, and/or belong to under-resourced minority groups (Pascarella et al., 2004). Navigating a lifetime of structural barriers and challenges based on these characteristics equips many first-generation doctoral students with individual attributes that are critical to degree completion, including a strong work ethic, resourcefulness, and comfort with delayed gratification (Holley & Gardner, 2013; Sverdlik et al., 2018).

First-generation doctoral students are also valuable contributors because they bring fresh research questions and perspectives to academic discourse. They are more heavily concentrated in applied doctoral programs, like education and social work. Individuals in EdD programs are more likely than students in Doctor of Philosophy programs to choose research topics with implications for professional practice (Friel, 2019). Similarly, they frequently report a desire to “make a difference in the world” as their reason for selecting an area of study (Gardner, 2013, p. 51). Given FGS’s diverse sets of personal and professional experiences when compared to their continuing-generation peers, they contribute unique literature to the body of applied research.

The ability for FGS to engage in scholarly research which may have a direct and positive impact on their community or professional practice might also engender a sense of empowerment. Rappaport defines empowerment as “a construct that links individual strengths and competencies, natural helping systems, and proactive behaviors to social policy and social change” (as cited in Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995, p. 569). Given that students typically choose research topics that are personally meaningful, FGS are likely to glean a sense of empowerment when they consider the potential for their work to generate positive social or policy change.
Finally, first-generation doctoral students are an asset to their cohort because they can effectively communicate research findings to a broader audience. After first-generation doctoral students move through the scholarly socialization process, they are likely to hold membership in two worlds (Gardner & Holley, 2011). While navigating differences in social norms and cultural scripts between the academic world and the working class homes many FGS come from can prove challenging at first (Gardner, 2013), achieving a sort of bi-lingual status can be advantageous to the individual and their departments. First-generation doctors may possess a unique ability to weave between white-collar and blue-collar circles with ease. This code-switching allows for the gates of the Ivory Tower to be more permeable to information flowing among subcultures, thereby advancing equity in knowledge and access to higher education.

Conclusion

Although first-generation doctoral students face unique challenges in pursuit of their terminal degree, many persist and reach graduation. First-generation students make up about 30 percent of all doctoral recipients in the U.S. (National Science Foundation, 2015). Through meaningful scholarly socialization and intentional program design, first-generation doctoral candidates can leverage their grit and unique perspectives to become invaluable scholars who empower others to follow their lead.

References


Students who decide to pursue a doctorate will undoubtedly face many challenges. To overcome these challenges and ultimately earn their degrees, students must have a sense of purpose, feel empowered, and have strategies to persist. While purpose is critical on its own, it also supports a sense of empowerment and is a key component of persistence. A clear understanding of purpose, regardless of what that purpose is and whether it remains static, is key for a student’s successful completion of a doctoral program.

Finding Purpose

Choosing to pursue a doctorate is a challenge that few decide to undertake, and students pursue doctorates for many reasons. Some reasons are internal, such as developing intellectually, gaining research experience, or having interest in a particular field; while other reasons are external, such as prestige or job prospects (Sverdlik & Hall, 2020). While these reasons may vary, a clear purpose is critical to successful completion of a doctoral program. Without a purpose, the long road ahead and inevitable potholes that a student will encounter can feel insurmountable and easily derail a student’s plan. The purpose need not remain the same throughout the program, or even day-to-day, but if that sense of purpose is lost, students risk losing motivation and perhaps even leaving the program. A purpose, therefore, becomes something every student can return to as motivation when times get challenging.

Not only does a doctoral student need a personal purpose, but ideally that purpose would align with the degree that student hopes to attain. As noted by Loxley and Kearns (2018), doctoral supervisors whom they interviewed saw a distinction between a
PhD and a professional doctorate (PD), such as an educational doctorate (EdD). The supervisors viewed the knowledge gained in the process of earning a PD as a vehicle for change, and more utilitarian than the knowledge gained in a PhD, which they viewed as an end unto itself. EdD programs are typically designed for practitioners to utilize existing knowledge to solve problems in education (Shulman et al., 2006). To see a problem in education, or any field for that matter, and feel ill-equipped to make a change is disheartening. Doctoral students, EdD or otherwise, develop research skills to thoroughly understand problems and address them. Since many EdD students are working on their degree mid-career, they also understand the practical aspects of the field (Hawkes & Taylor, 2016). This puts PD graduates in a unique position to create change, which can give them a strong sense of purpose.

Another important alignment is between the doctoral student and their supervisor. In a set of interviews conducted with 50 doctoral supervisors, their responses to the question of a doctorate’s purpose fell within four different categories: instrumentalism, recognition, positionality, and knowledge generation (Loxley & Kearns, 2018). An instrumentalism view of the doctorate views the degree as one that can use newfound knowledge to create change within a particular field. The supervisors who viewed the degree through the lens of recognition saw attainment of a doctorate as an indicator of intellect and credibility within a field. Positionality is similar to recognition, but with the added feature of signaling to employers a capability of holding a particular position, such as a faculty member at a university. Knowledge generation, similar to instrumentalism, is about generating new knowledge in a particular field, not to a particular end, but rather as an end in and of itself. Which purpose the supervisor supported is less important than whether their views align with their advisee’s purpose.
Empowerment in Many Forms

There are many ways that a doctoral student can feel empowered. They can feel empowered recognizing the changes their degree can help them make. They can feel empowered by the changes they see in their identity while completing the doctoral program. They can also feel empowered by finding a supervisor whose views align with their own purpose. When Akerlind and McAlpine (2017) looked at how supervisors see their role in a doctoral program, like Loxley and Kearns (2018), they found that supervisors had a variety of views on the purpose of a doctorate. With this variety of views, there is the possibility of supervisors and students not seeing the pursuit of their degree the same way, and thus hindering the students’ progress. In light of this, Loxley and Kearns (2018) encouraged a more extensive discussion of these views to help match students with supervisors. A well-matched student to a supervisor with a similar vision can greatly empower a student, and thus help increase the odds that a student will successfully complete their doctorate.

Another important source of empowerment for a doctoral student is the experience of a shift in identity. Doctoral students, particularly those seeking professional doctorates, are often seeking to make a change in their field or community. Often, before they can make that change, they must seek a change in their own identity. They must move towards being an expert or scholar while attempting to reconcile still being a student. This can lead to struggles with identity (Mantai, 2015). Doctoral students are learning to do research and scholarly work, yet it is unclear when they truly become a researcher or scholar. Many students feel caught between two different identities. A significant number of doctoral students also experience ‘imposter syndrome,’ in which, despite evidence to the contrary, a student believes that other students are smarter and more capable than they are (Benzel, 2022). These psychological challenges can hinder a student’s
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progress. Once again, a clear sense of purpose can help overcome these challenges.

Nygaard and Savva (2021) describe ‘becoming’ as “finding out who we are and where we fit in” (p. 11). A doctoral program is designed to teach a student research skills that will allow that student to become a scholar. Yet many educational doctoral students still see themselves as teachers and never fully as scholars. There is a tension between their ‘two worlds.’ In their professional lives they are focused on practical solutions to very particular problems. In their academic lives they are looking for general themes that can add to the body of academic knowledge (Nygaard & Savva, 2021). Having a clear purpose can help doctoral students push through these questions of identity and empower them to reach their goal.

Regardless of the purpose, the student needs to feel empowered to pursue that purpose. Empowerment is about connecting an individual’s strengths with a societal or community need (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). One facet of empowerment is equipping a student with the skills necessary to create change within a community or field. If a student sees a clear purpose for why they are in a doctoral program and feel as though the program will give them the skills necessary to help create that change, these are ingredients for a successful completion of that program. The student can use this purpose to help them develop into the person they want to become.

Pursuing a doctorate can be an isolating experience. A powerful way to mitigate that isolation is through a cohort model. One description of empowerment is enabling individuals to achieve their personal goals through participation with a group (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). This is strong support for the cohort model of many doctoral programs. A cohort model is designed to have a small group of students work through their studies at a similar rate (Santicola, 2013). Simply being in a cohort
is not enough. The cohort must be organized in such a way that students feel connected with each other as well as the institution. Doctoral students feel a wide range of emotions, from anxiety to fear to isolation. Feeling connected with other students and recognizing that others have similar feelings can relieve students of that isolation and help them persist within the program. Beyond just empathizing with fellow cohort members, when trust is built between cohort members, those relationships make a significant difference and can help a student through difficult times (Hawkes & Taylor, 2016). Students who have built those relationships can share materials, peer edit writing, and support one another emotionally (Nygaard & Savva, 2021), which all empower students to persist.

**Skills of Persistence**

A doctoral degree requires a strong sense of purpose and many forms of empowerment, but because it often takes between three to over ten years to complete (Hudson et al., 2020), it also takes persistence. Having a growth mindset, grit, and passion will serve a doctoral student well. These are all assets that a student can develop within a program and that doctoral programs would ideally encourage.

Due to the changing landscape of higher education, new skills are necessary to finish a doctoral program. Many doctoral students, particularly those seeking an educational doctorate, have responsibilities beyond school such as a family, work, and other social responsibilities (Hudson et al., 2020). Online options offer necessary flexibility to working students but can also lead to more feelings of isolation and being disconnected. A common way to keep students motivated and engaged during collegiate studies used to be involvement with school activities. This could be through sports or other extracurricular activities, or just time spent socially with their classmates. Feeling like a part of the school helped students persist in their program. This is a much harder task
with students studying at a distance. Other factors that make doctoral students feel less a part of the community is their age, their phase of life, and in the case of professional degrees, students are often part time. These new challenges motivated Hudson et al. (2020) to focus on personal traits of students, in particular grit and a growth mindset, rather than the traditional focus on student involvement and integration. These qualities can help students persist through the inevitable challenges they will face while working towards their degree.

Students in a doctoral program will likely face academic challenges and levels of failure that perhaps they had not experienced in the past. Due to the nature of original research, most doctoral students feel more personally connected to and emotionally invested in their doctoral work than they would their undergraduate work. This can lead to a more visceral reaction to a critique or bad grade. This is where a student needs to show resilience or grit. Grit is the ability to face adversity and still persist. Since grit is often developed through a student’s life experiences, not all students enter their doctoral program having grit. As demonstrated through the growth mindset, personal attributes are not fixed, but can grow when given the opportunity (Dweck, 2006).

Experiencing failure is an important part of cultivating a growth mindset (Davis, 2016). Failure alone is not the goal, but how one responds to and understands that failure. So often students entangle their self-worth with their grades. If each time a student fails or falls short of their goals they view it as a black mark against them as a person, then their work in a doctoral program will take a heavy toll. A bad grade can become an existential crisis. If, rather, the student can see failure as an opportunity for growth and actually celebrates the failure, this will allow the student to grow in grit. Doctoral programs should seek to give students the space to fail with the proper supports to make
it a positive experience. Support from outside the school in friends, family, and communities is important, but since schools cannot control this, the use of the cohort model is once again very beneficial. If a student struggles in isolation, this is more likely to lead to negative outcomes, whereas the support of a cohort can help a student move through the struggles and feel a sense of community (Nygaard & Savva, 2021).

Another important feature in developing grit is passion (Hudson et al., 2020). A student entering a doctoral program in a field that they do not have a passion for is a cause for concern. A student needs many tools to finish a doctorate, and passion is a near necessity. This is particularly true when choosing a dissertation topic. Doctoral students spend a minimum of one year, and likely more, focusing on their dissertation topic. Though the excitement about the topic may wax and wane, if there is deeper passion for the topic it will help get a student through periods of stress and exhaustion.

High levels of stress, anxiety, and exhaustion are common reasons for a student to leave a doctoral program. Though all students experience these symptoms to some extent, stress, anxiety, and exhaustion were shown to be higher among students considering leaving their doctoral program (Sverdlik & Hall, 2020). A strong sense of purpose can help motivate a student in hard times. This is particularly true when a student feels a “societal obligation or others-centered mentality driving their [...] achievement” (Hudson et al., 2020, p. 724). Studies have shown that people with a higher sense of purpose are more satisfied with their lives and react less to daily stressors (Pfund et al., 2020). If higher stress is associated with students leaving doctoral programs, then purpose can help keep stress levels down and help students persist through completion of their degree.
Conclusion

During the long journey of earning a doctorate, students must maintain a strong sense of purpose and continuously return to it for motivation. This can be reinforced by a program and supervisor that support and share the values of the student. In addition to the support of the institution, a cohort of peers can be a major source of empowerment. While each student will hit roadblocks, they will be more likely to persist with grit and a growth mindset. All of these factors can help contribute to the successful completion of a doctoral program.

References


