

Supporting EdD Scholar-Practitioners through the COVID-19 Pandemic Using an Ethic of Care

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ABSTRACT

Given the significant challenges PK-12 educational leaders currently face, the purpose of this essay is to orient EdD faculty with Noddings' (1984/2003) care ethics as a framework for conceptualizing their work and employing care acts to support EdD scholar-practitioners through the COVID-19 pandemic. Practical strategies for this work are suggested. The author argues that Noddings' (1984/2003) ethic of care provides a timely lens through which EdD faculty's actions can be guided. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, faculty have become tasked with supporting their students' socioemotional well-being in addition to their academic progress. EdD faculty must be responsive to these needs if they are to retain students and effectively train scholar-practitioners to identify and address problems of practice. Stemming from this argument, future research could empirically investigate how employing care ethics affects scholar-practitioners' well-being, program satisfaction, retention, and completion rates.

KEYWORDS

education doctorate, EdD faculty, ethic of care, COVID-19 pandemic

INTRODUCTION

EdD students are tasked with managing multiple roles and responsibilities stemming from their professional, personal, and academic lives (Hill & Conceição, 2020), which can lead to tensions as they attempt to balance these intersecting and sometimes conflicting spheres (Kovalcikiene & Buksnyte, 2015; Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2019). Historically low retention and graduation rates in doctoral programs may be indicative of the unique challenges EdD scholar-practitioners face in maintaining this balance and completing their degrees. Retention rates across doctoral programs are typically around 50% (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2019), and online doctoral programs, a popular program delivery format for EdD programs, have attrition rates that are 10-20% higher (Graham & Massyn, 2019). The Council of Graduate Schools (2022) reports that even "under highly favorable conditions," 25% of doctoral students still fail to complete their degrees (para. 3).

Although both programmatic and personal factors influence attrition in doctoral programs (Hill & Conceição, 2020; Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2019), scholars have vigorously critiqued the EdD specifically for being disconnected from the work of educational practitioners (Levine, 2005; Shulman et al., 2006). While there is currently no empirical data nationally to shed light on the connection between practitioner-oriented EdD programs and EdD student attrition, aligning coursework and practice is a common premise for improving student outcomes in the discourse on re-envisioned EdD programs. For example, EdD reformers such as Shulman et al. (2006) and Perry (2016) have argued that EdD programs need to be

distinguished from PhD programs and more relevant to preparing educational leaders. The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) (2021) has proposed principles for program design to support the development of scholar-practitioners who can inquire into and address problems of practice (PoPs), and some CPED institutions have begun to replace a traditional, five-chapter dissertation that prepares researchers for academic work with dissertations in practice that support leaders as they address problems in their practice (Tamim & Torres, 2022). These efforts to align coursework and practice have led to new, practitioner-oriented visions for EdD program design, curriculum, and pedagogy, which may serve to improve doctoral retention and completion rates by aligning the work that students do in their programs with their professional roles and responsibilities.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced an additional, significant burden for EdD scholar-practitioners as many have been tasked with: (a) managing professional responsibilities such as never-before-seen school closures, the jarring move to remote and/or hybrid teaching and learning, and the demands of keeping schools, students, and families safe; (b) keeping pace with their doctoral studies; and (c) caring for themselves and their families including aging parents and school-aged children (Browning, 2021; Bukko & Dhesi, 2021). While many were hopeful that the 2021-2022 school year would see a return to more normal schooling environments, the surge in COVID-19 cases due to the Delta variant in the summer of 2021 further prolonged the uncertainty many educational leaders, students, and families faced (Tirrell, 2021). Concurrently and without warning, PK-12 educational leaders quickly



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became tasked with navigating new and contentious policies at the state and federal levels regarding masking and vaccine mandates. In the late summer and fall of 2021, U.S. news outlets frequently reported scenes from school board meetings that had become antagonistic and combative as parents fought back against these state and district policies (Ferris, 2021; Hassan, 2021; Lenthang, 2021). On a positive note, at the time of this writing many districts around the country have returned to some form of in-person education. Still, educational leaders must now find ways to make up for the academic and socioemotional learning losses students suffered over the past two academic years (Camera, 2022a), manage teacher burnout (Modan, 2022), and deal with school staffing crises due to a mass exodus from the teaching profession (Camera, 2022b). Despite the return to more normal PK-12 schooling conditions, educational leaders are not returning to their normal working conditions.

While EdD students may have needed targeted socioemotional and academic support in normal times to stem the tide of attrition due to the stress of managing full-time careers, coursework, and personal responsibilities, the socio-political and educational contexts they currently face in their professional lives demand that EdD program faculty and administrators be responsive to the lived realities of their students and provide intentional and targeted support. Noddings' (1984/2003) ethics of care provides an apt lens for approaching EdD education in this current context due to its forefronting of the natural human instinct to care and be cared for as the basis of moral action, the situatedness of caring through relations, and educational grounding and implications for educators at all levels. Noddings' (1984/2003) work has long been popular in educational ethics and has recently been used to guide the development of relationships between researchers and the practitioners with whom they engage in research (e.g., Bergmark, 2020). However, using ethics of care as a framework for EdD education, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, has not been explored.

The following sections provide an overview of Noddings' (1984/2003) ethics of care and offer examples of care acts in which EdD faculty and program administrators can engage to support EdD students who are PK-12 practitioners through the COVID-19 pandemic. I conclude by arguing that, during this unprecedented time, EdD program faculty must use an alternative lens for approaching their work in order to: (a) be responsive to scholar-practitioners' current PK-12 realities, (b) provide extra support to students in coursework and dissertation activities, (c) and retain and sustain students as they develop into scholar-practitioners with inquiry skills and dispositions needed to address PoPs.

ETHIC OF CARE

Noddings (1984/2003) posited that "[h]uman caring and the memory of caring and being cared for...form the foundation of ethical response" (p. 1) and spurs one to be moral with the ultimate goal of connection within relationships, specifically between the one-caring and the cared-for. She traces the act of caring to the natural action of a mother caring for a child as the relation that forms all human interactions. Following suit, the one-caring is outward-focused and engages in caring acts out of moral prompting to benefit the cared-for rather than for self-adulation or praise. For there to be a caring relation, the cared-for must believe that the one-caring actually does care about them or their situation and that the care acts performed are not perfunctory. Noddings argued, "we cannot justify ourselves

as carers by claiming 'we care.' If the recipients of our care insist that 'nobody cares,' caring relations do not exist" (1984/2003, p. xiv). One can tell if the care acts are genuine if the one-caring is looking outward to the cared-for and if the action has a positive effect or is likely to have a positive effect on the cared-for.

The action of caring stems from the cared-for being in an objective state of needing assistance, and the care acts performed by the one-caring are done out of a sense of compassion and affection for the cared-for. In order to perform care acts, the one-caring should step outside their individual perspective or narrowed lens and should pay particular attention to: (a) the specific situation in which the cared-for resides, (b) the needs of the cared-for, and (c) the expectations of the cared-for for the one-caring. Noddings (1984/2003) argues that the caring acts should be motivated by intuition and fondness for the one cared-for rather than guided by a predetermined set of rules. Finally, care ethics are reciprocal. As the cared-for benefits from the care acts, the one-caring receives a sense of joy from performing the care acts. This act of reciprocity, according to Noddings (1984/2003), is not a contract between two actors but a guiding ethic of in lieu of absolute moral principles.

EMPLOYING AN ETHIC OF CARE IN EDD EDUCATION

Care ethics have a specific application in the field of education. In fact, Noddings (1984/2003) argued that, "The greatest obligation of educators, inside and outside formal schooling, is to nurture the ethical ideals of those with whom they come in contact" (p. 49). She further argued that "the student is infinitely more important than the subject [being taught]" (Noddings, 1984/2003, p. 20). While EdD faculty work within institutional and programmatic constraints that dictate many aspects of their work including policy, curriculum, pedagogy, and course delivery format, these faculty are well-positioned to not only apply care ethics in their classrooms and programs but also model this stance for PK-12 educational leaders who themselves are likely acting as the ones-caring for teachers, staff, students, and local community members in their districts. Many EdD faculty are guided by a strong sense of ethics and service and care about their students' academic and professional success. Furthermore, they are in close contact with students through advising, coursework, and dissertation activities. Therefore, the question becomes not *should* EdD faculty engage in an ethic of care to support their students through the COVID-19 pandemic but rather *how* can EdD faculty effectively do this?

To address this question, I provide examples of care acts my EdD program colleagues and I have used over the past two and a half years that have made a difference in our students' academic and personal well-being as they have been communicated to me. However, it is important to first clarify what caring ethics is not. Care ethics does not include dumbing down the curriculum, inflating grades, or allowing students to consistently miss classes and deadlines. All of those actions are inherently *unethical* and do not demonstrate care, because they do not provide high expectations for student learning. Furthermore, taking on an ethic of care does not mean that faculty members should become their students' counselors. Faculty may not be trained in mental health counseling, may not feel comfortable in this role or that it is not a part of their responsibilities, and acting in this role may put additional stress or fatigue on faculty members. Rather, care ethics seeks to support



students through appropriately-rigorous curriculum, assignments, course expectations, and management of life circumstances. EdD faculty can embody and apply an ethic of care to their work with scholar-practitioners during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in three different areas: academics, relationships with other students, faculty, and the program, and personal life. Table 1 below provides a sampling of care acts that EdD faculty members can employ to demonstrate caring ethics for their students. This sample of care acts was influenced by several sources including: (a) Noddings' (1984/2003) work as discussed in the prior section; (b) Knowles' (1988) theory of andragogy, which posits, in part, that adult learning should be meaningful and relevant, self-directed, and connected to adults' personal and professional lives; (c) research on doctoral student attrition that demonstrates the importance of connection and building relationships among students, peers, and faculty (e.g., Fiore et al., 2019; Hill & Conceição, 2020; Studebaker & Curtis, 2021), and (d) research on and first-hand accounts of EdD students' experiences during the pandemic (e.g., Brochu et al., 2021; Browning, 2021; Bukko & Dhesi, 2021).

Table 1. Examples of Care Acts to Support EdD Scholar-Practitioners

Table with 2 columns: Area of Care and Care Acts. Rows include Academics, Relationships with Students, Faculty, Program, and Personal Life, each with a list of specific care acts.

While EdD faculty cannot and should not be expected to meet all of their students' academic, professional, and personal needs, lower expectations, or take on the role of professional mental health counselors, there are a variety of practical and time-friendly strategies that faculty can use to embody and apply an ethic of care in their programs and support PK-12 scholar-practitioners through—and after—the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the specific care acts employed may look different depending on program delivery format, course, and instructor personalities and pedagogies, being aware of students' needs, acknowledging them, and allowing space for caring acts is necessary, impactful, and equity-minded. Studies have shown that building and sustaining relationships among students and between the student and faculty members in doctoral programs supports program completion (Council of Graduate Schools, 2022; Deshpande et al., 2016; Hill & Conceição, 2020), especially in online programs (Fiore et al., 2019; Studebaker & Curtis, 2021). Student-faculty relationships may be even more critical post-coursework when faculty members take on a supervisory role, but these relationships may also be harder to establish and maintain in online EdD programs (Bawa, 2016). Thus, care acts may also function to support both scholar-practitioners' well-being and retention and program completion efforts.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed PK-12 practitioners on the front lines of keeping children safe, preventing and managing large scale teacher burnout, handling parental pushback against state masking and vaccine policies, and mediating learning losses. Some of these challenges have never been seen before, and the convergence of them all together is a complex phenomenon for which there is no precedent for addressing them effectively. However, CPED-inspired programs that emphasize the development of scholar-practitioners are well-positioned to support EdD students through these challenges because of their focus on identifying a PoP in a local context, using practitioner inquiry methods to inquire around the PoP, blending scholarly knowledge with practical wisdom, and advancing social justice work. Students in these programs have a prime opportunity to use their doctoral coursework and dissertation research to address persistent PoPs that existed before the pandemic as well as PoPs arising from the pandemic. Therefore, it is important that EdD programs continue to recruit PK-12 educational leaders into their programs and support them through program completion.

However, as Noddings (1984/2003) emphasized, it is not enough for program administrators or faculty to tell students they care about their professional, academic, and personal success and well-being; faculty must show that they care through targeted individual and group support. In order to provide this support in the three areas identified in the literature and referenced in Table 1, EdD program faculty could reexamine their program, curriculum, and dissertation structures as well as their individual pedagogical and instructional orientations and look for ways they are already employing or could adopt new care acts. Alternatively, they could solicit feedback from students who have left the program and learn where students struggle and how they might help students meet these challenges (Carter-Veale et al., 2019). Programs, especially those that are hybrid or online, might offer professional and extracurricular events to build relationships among students and between students and faculty. Finally, faculty can take time to listen



to and acknowledge students' current lived realities whether individually or in class. I have found that doing this at the start of class is a powerful space and practice for students and faculty to relieve stress, build empathy, foster connections, reflect, and clear the mind to be ready to absorb new and challenging content.

Although the pandemic has stagnated at the time of this writing, new and exacerbated pressures stemming from it compounded on top of personal and professional responsibilities will likely continue to be a significant strain on EdD students who are also full-time practitioners. Therefore, EdD program faculty and administrators will likely be tasked with providing intentional support to students to prevent attrition. In this uncertain time when students and families across the world need exceptional PK-12 educational leaders, it is critical that EdD programs, specifically CPED-inspired programs, continue their important work of raising up scholar-practitioners who can face pandemic-induced challenges head-on. Like their students' work, EdD program faculty's work has perhaps never been so important.

While this paper presents a largely theoretical argument, future research could inform the practices of EdD programs and faculty and shed light on how to not only support EdD students through the pandemic and its fallout but also inform the field how to slow student attrition from practitioner-oriented EdD programs. Several important questions could guide this work such as: *How might employing Noddings' (1984/2003) care ethics and specific care acts such as those offered in this paper affect EdD students' well-being, program satisfaction, retention, and completion rates? How are faculty in practitioner-oriented EdD programs taking up care ethics or employing care acts to support their students? What are students' responses to these care acts, and which care acts are most effective?* Moreover, learning how connecting coursework to practice, which I argue is a care act, improves EdD student outcomes could strengthen the argument that Shulman et al. (2006), Perry (2016), and others have made for a distinct, practitioner-focused EdD degree.

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