

Honor, Build, and Restructure: Preparing Transformative School Leaders as Equitable Changemakers Through Doctoral Research Methods Courses

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ABSTRACT

School leaders enrolled in CPED-influenced and practitioner focused doctoral programs require specific research-based skills and knowledge that bridge both educational scholarship and practice in order to be relevant for both their dissertation process and school practice. In doing so, these doctorate in education (EdD) programs must critically exam their qualitative research methods courses to honor the professional practice of their adult learners and usher in innovative, collaborative, transformative, and participatory research design courses to meet this demand. As such we present our methodological course sequence built on principles of adult learning and a signature pedagogy, the first course is a reimagination of the qualitative research course and the second is a reconceptualized transformative capstone.

KEYWORDS

EdD, qualitative methodology, transformative capstone

School leaders enrolled in the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) -influenced and practitioner-focused doctoral programs require specific research-based skills and knowledge that bridge both educational scholarship and practice in order to be relevant for both their dissertation process and school practice. In doing so, these doctorate in education (EdD) programs must critically exam their qualitative research methods courses to honor the professional practice of their adult learners and usher in innovative, collaborative, and participatory research design courses to meet this demand. In fact, the restructuring of these courses is fundamental for the development of future transformative school leaders.

In Illinois State University's (ISU) EdD program for PK12 leadership, students prepare to serve as transformative leaders and practitioner-scholars working in cohorts of 10-14 students. The final semester of the EdD course sequence, prior to the dissertation process, we offer a two-course sequence, a qualitative research methods course and a capstone course, intended to integrate earlier studies and provide students with the initial elements of a proposal. ISU's Dissertation in Practice (DiP) uses Mintrop's (2016) cycle of inquiry to be completed within 90 days as an approach to professional learning that allows for school-based collaborative teams to learn more quickly and completely, resulting in transformative change in schools and districts. EdD students develop school teams of three or more site-based practitioners and work through the Mintrop (2016) seven-part cycle.

Aligned to CPED's Guiding Principles, the final semester course sequence crowns the three-year program with support for pursuing a team-based dissertation process in the candidates' laboratories of practice based on problems of practice (PoPs) developed within each team. In both courses, the initial three phases of the cycle include defining and refining PoPs, raising team assumptions about the PoPs with the possibility of further refinement, and bringing scholarship into practice to inform students' PoPs. These three collaborative tasks together become a theory of action that the DiP will implement and test. The two courses work synergistically, by cooperatively interacting and wrapping student support between these two courses, to reinforce CPED-inspired elements of the program. For example, we utilize guiding principles, such as a transformative leadership with a social justice imperative, emphasize collaborative research designs, and adopt program design concepts that place the practitioner-scholar in a community to understand complex PoPs by taking deep dives into analyzing those problems and developing testable, equitable responses. Built on principles of adult learning and signature pedagogies, the first course is a reimagination of the qualitative research course, and the second course is a reconceptualized transformative capstone. In each case, three features exemplify the common approaches in the two courses, transformative adult learning theory, CPED Program Design Concepts (2021) as signature pedagogies, and building transformative capacity. Each is discussed in turn below.



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HONORING ADULT LEARNERS: TRANSFORMATIVE ADULT LEARNING THEORY

Unlike graduate students in times past who were “solitary scholars” (Kasworm & Bowles, 2010, p. 224), current students enter graduate studies with more life commitments, including family, career, and other individual engagements, rather than focusing solely on intellectual research pursuits in the ivory towers of the academy. Further, the composition of graduate students is more diverse in relation to gender, race, ethnicity, social class, sexuality, religious affiliation, ability, international cultures, family provider commitments, and other specialized backgrounds (Kasworm & Bowles, 2010). Given the specialized needs and array of expertise our current students bring to graduate studies, it is perplexing that institutions of higher education struggle with the adoption of asset-based pedagogies, which honor the lived experiences of students and mobilize the insights of a diverse student population by intentionally drawing on student assets.

Honoring the professional expertise of adult learners is oftentimes overlooked in doctoral programs. Because CPED-influenced and practitioner focused doctoral programs typically enroll practicing school leaders and administrators, it is imperative for programs to align their courses to both meet the needs of adult learners by informing their practice with transformative adult learning theory and adopting asset-based pedagogy, which places the adult learner as one among many experts in the room. Within our program, after several iterations of course programming, we adopted systems to leverage our students' expertise as part of our instructional approach of honoring the expertise of our adult learners in our programmatic educational spaces. Because these systems became the norms in course work with adult sense-making as a primary focus (Mezirow, 1991; 2000), students were provided with great latitude in selecting projects, offered practice-based cases for critical examination, participated in deep analysis, and engaged in praxis. CPED's (2021) principles inspired our attempts to provide a context in which the adult learner as educational leader is offered “real-life, context-specific, tactical, anti-racist work in our schools” (Skrla et al., 2001, p. 239). Additionally, we approach this work through the lens of signature pedagogies, characteristic of professional education, serving adult learners with attention to their professional status, and ongoing commitment to professional learning.

PROGRAM DESIGN CONCEPT: SIGNATURE PEDAGOGIES

CPED (2021) offers signature pedagogies as one of seven Program Design Concepts. In coursework, signature pedagogies encourage students to enact their professional roles in a low-risk learning environment embracing design-based school improvement (Bryk et al., 2004; Mintrop, 2016). Since our students are working professionals, design approaches as signature pedagogies engage them in collaborative practices within the courses as real-life cases used to elevate distinctive leadership challenges as complex PoPs. Assignments and assessments tie scholarship to the work of transformative leadership under an equity imperative. Repetitive cycles of inquiry engrain this approach, insisting on development and analysis of a PoP that meets CPED's (2021) criteria. That is, the problem is situated in a specific context that represents a common but serious dilemma which, if addressed in multiple cycles of inquiry, would make a great contribution to education's knowledge base in

both theoretical and practical spheres (Bryk, 2020). Practice is honored by applying design approaches coupled with critical analysis, reflective praxis, and accountability as they are seldom observed outside a professional preparation setting. The adult learners are honored for their experience and expertise but also gently challenged to stretch their current understandings. In sum, school and district improvement would change to align with design principles intended to make professional learning a new norm within schools. In short, we want more from our students than successful dissertations, rather we seek to alter practice in alignment with CPED-informed approaches that apply the principles and concepts and enhance the transformative capacity of educational leadership to help education learn faster (Bryk et al., 2015).

BUILDING TRANSFORMATIVE CAPACITY

Moreover, educational leadership is intended to be a collaborative process with people working towards common goals for the formation, capacity building, and sustainability of just and equitable conditions (Shields, 2020). Because transformative leadership begins with questions of justice and democracy and critiques inequitable practices that offer a better individual life and one lived in common with others (Shields, 2010), it aligns with the critical need to transform the perspectives of scholar-practitioners enrolled in CPED-influenced and practitioner focused doctoral programs. That is, our doctoral students may need to unlearn in order to relearn, a concept embraced by the transformative learning approach.

To meet the needs of adult learners, a transformative learning approach (Kasworm & Bowles, 2010; Mezirow, 1991; 2000), where students are provided the opportunity to transform their preconceived perspectives, habits of mind, mindsets, and mental models in favor of critically inclusive, equitable and reflective beliefs and opinions that serve as a transformative guide towards sustainable change in PreK-12 schools. In fact, through content analysis, Hoggan (2016) identified six categories of transformative learning outcomes: (1) changes in worldview encompassing a new awareness or understanding, including questioning assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, and expectations, (2) modifications in a student's sense of self, such as changes in one's purpose, personality, or identity, (3) epistemological changes or different ways of knowing, (4) ontological shifts, including ways of being and adjustments to affective attributes like empathy, and kindness, (5) behavioral shifts aligned with a new perspective, including commitments to social action and professional practices and, (6) the ability to further build their capacity that reflects their transformative experience. Lastly, Franco (2019) reminds us that people who have participated in transformative learning come out of the experience different, as recognized by themselves and others.

RESTRUCTURING RESEARCH DESIGN COURSES: AN INNOVATIVE TWO-PART MODEL

In addition to honoring the professional expertise and building the transformative leadership capacity of scholar-practitioners, it is recommended that CPED-influenced and practitioner-focused doctoral programs restructure their qualitative research design courses to bridge both educational scholarship and practice. We offer our two-part qualitative research design course sequence as a viable model.

Because adult learners have fewer opportunities to build relationships with their peers and faculty potentially resulting in uncomfortable uncertainty and isolation to demystify the doctoral journey in community, ideally, this CPED-driven model should be delivered within the same semester in a co-teaching or team-teaching model, but delivery through two consecutive semesters will work, as well. The first course will cover an introduction to qualitative research with an emphasis on participatory action research (PAR) (Bhattacharya, 2017), a deep dive into the PoPs (Mintrop, 2016) to include school improvement tools, such as the 5 whys, fishbones, and driver diagrams. The school improvement tools derive from improvement science, further informing the foundations of CPED and is acknowledged as a third suite of research methods for DiPs (Perry et al., 2020), and we have integrated this understanding into what was a more traditional qualitative methods course. The second course will provide the students the opportunity to explore their funds of identity (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014), revisit the CPED guiding principles (CPED, 2021), apply social justice as a crosscutting theme, and learn the fundamentals of writing a literature review and conceptual framework.

The First Course: Reimagining Qualitative Research for the Dissertation in Practice

In Illinois State University's (ISU) Phase IV EdD program for school and district leadership, alignment of research methods courses generally has been a challenge. For one thing, not all faculty are equally invested in CPED, and research methods faculty often only teach EdD students in a stand-alone methods course with clear distinctions between qualitative and quantitative methods. Given this preparation, CPED students and EdD candidates are challenged to imagine doctoral research as collaborative and more rooted in PoPs than in research questions or gaps in literature that imply familiar affinities in terms of research methods. And, of course, faculty may have the same assumptions working against the practitioner-scholar model and the PAR model it implies (Bhattacharya, 2017). Traditional texts and approaches to qualitative research embody these assumptions of solo scholarship responding to literature and asking questions for a study of some phenomenon, discouraging deeper analysis of the PoP from its roots in leadership praxis. Finally, the use of Improvement Science (IS) tools is outside the purview of research faculty and viewed as a novelty but not an opportunity to employ innovative methodological tools. In the end, if student candidate research projects are disconnected from their lived experiences as adult learners, then the opportunity for adults to learn together in a practice setting is lost.

Former iterations of our qualitative research course offered qualitative methods variously from the social sciences based on a scholar asking research questions and/or going into the field as a more-or-less connected observer. The most common research method was the interview. Texts chosen by faculty reflected their preferences, always rooted in traditional research paradigms. In the reimagined, paired qualitative course, development of a PoP is paralleled to the work in the capstone and qualitative methods emerge while working through the first three phases of the cycle of inquiry (Mintrop, 2016). Settling on and developing a complex PoP elicits just-in-time qualitative methods as the students complete a needs assessment and gather preliminary evidence to enhance the PoP. The conceptual barriers for students about to be doctoral candidates derived from several sources, chief among them is the

requirement to work collaboratively within the laboratory of practice, the need to learn how to embark on PAR, analytical development of a complex PoP as a signature pedagogy and using IS tools analytically. Each of these requirements represents design-based improvement as a signature pedagogy of our EdD program. We take each challenge in turn, drawing upon CPED's (2021) Program Design Concepts.

Practitioner Scholar as Collaborator

To begin, even though there are commonly collaborative structures in schools, many do not function effectively to address problems or contribute to adult learning as design-based shared learning requires (Bryk et al., 2015; Mintrop, 2016). The CPED Program Design Concepts (2021) are clear on several points that position EdD practitioner-scholar research: (1) theory and practice are mutually informative within laboratories of practice, (2) scholarship is invariably applied to inquiry in schools and districts, and (3) complex PoPs are ongoing and worthy of addressing collaboratively as a new norm of practice deriving from cycles of inquiry as a signature pedagogy. Practitioner-scholars apply the parameters of Mintrop's (2016) collaborative cycle of inquiry to raise the tacit assumptions of the collaborative research team as they study a problem and apply scholarship to generate a theory of action to be tested. In this course, we see our students frequently surprised to learn their school collaborators' assumptions about an emerging PoP. Naturally, this is practical scholarship as the student learns more about the collaborative team. For example, when exploring a PoP regarding the lack of attendance in particular classes by high school students who identify as Black, teachers expressed the view that the students were unmotivated and immature, surfacing a deficit framing approach by the white teachers of these students. Upon initiating PAR, the group determined that students skipped class because of the poor relationships with certain teachers. Collaborative exploration allowed our EdD students to further understand root causes of their PoP and for teachers to examine their views and question them as transformative learners in an adult space. Few traditional qualitative studies accomplish as much, and this was just the first phase of the collaboration.

Further, when practice-based teams work analytically, they can deeply explore the problem in context, use scholarship to further their understanding, and develop initiatives or strategies as theories of action to study in a complete cycle of inquiry. Additionally, schools and districts are at widely varied levels of preparedness for collaboration as a foundation for PAR, an approach from the qualitative tradition well-matched with the expectations for a CPED-oriented DiP. Between the two courses, practice-based collaborations are supported and the possibilities for ongoing design-based learning enhanced. Again, we seek to build these habits of analytical collaboration as a new norm in the laboratories of practice where our EdD graduates lead, providing them with the conceptual and practical tools to do so.

Participatory Action Research

In our context of practice, the previous qualitative research course was situated in the anthropological tradition. For example, the text described going out into the field and working as a participant observer in detail (Glesne, 2016). While its participatory nature met our expectations, some elements of the methodology and methods would not serve our students as transformative leaders or EdD



candidates. When we united the qualitative and capstone courses, we realized our signature pedagogy, the design-based approach to collaborative research, was our best chance to alter both the expectations of the dissertation and the realities of school practice using PAR. The Mintrop (2016) cycle of inquiry provides a PAR framework structured to enable even novice teams to begin analytical work on complex concerns in their laboratories of practice. PAR surfaced as the most promising framework for most of our students' projects. Leaders were not independent researchers coming around asking questions or sending out surveys. From the developing the PoP to the testing of a theory of action in the cycle of inquiry, the researcher is immersed in the conditions surrounding the problem with others. In many cases, everyone contributes, even in a small way, to the problem and its sustenance, and the recognition of this reality is key to adult transformative learning. Supplementing the cycle of inquiry are resources on PAR that situate it in the broader qualitative tradition of action research with attention to application in PK12 settings (McTaggart, 1997). Gathering evidence arises as a feature of the cycle rather than a preordained design. In short, this first course is not a survey of qualitative methods. Rather, the course introduces qualitative methods as they emerge in the cycle of inquiry.

Problem of Practice (PoP) and Mintrop's Cycle of Inquiry

In the Program Design Concepts, the PoP is defined as "a persistent, consistent, contextualized, and specific issue embedded in the work of a professional practitioner, the addressing of which has the potential to result in improved understanding, experience, and outcomes" (CPED, 2021, para. 13). The two-course sequence focuses on this definition and how PoPs are analytically defined and understood in a specific context. Indeed, the PoP, defined, framed, and reframed through Mintrop's (2016) cycle of inquiry, united the two courses as a foundation for PAR and for fulfilling the requirements of CPED's (2021) Guiding Principles for social justice DiPs. With that shared focus, the transformative learning in the course sequence is enhanced.

Much of the work we have committed to centers on the cycle of inquiry model developed by Rick Mintrop (2016) which specifies parameters for collaboration and offers direction that dovetails well with PAR, although there is methodological variation among our students' projects, including the use of IS tools. In Mintrop's (2016) *Design-Based School Improvement: A Practical Guide for Education Leaders*, four case studies demonstrate a process by which a theory of action is collaboratively developed, and a cycle of inquiry completed. Our DiPs consist of a single 90-day cycle of inquiry that follows this model, and the two-course sequence finalizes the approach and supports the soon-to-be EdD candidates to fulfill design-based school improvement demonstrated in this culminating assessment.

School Improvement Tools

Many CPED EdD programs use IS within the suite of research tools (Perry et al., 2020). Our revised qualitative research course introduces IS tools, and the students begin their collaborative work in earnest. First, the IS tools fit the practitioner-scholar paradigm and provide a practical means of convening teams that are perhaps unaccustomed to the rigors of analytical collaboration. Second, Mintrop's (2016) work dovetails with IS tools as PoPs develop into theories of action to be tested. Their hands-on nature makes them appealing to educators, and their flexibility allows for revising the

PoP as Mintrop (2016) presents it. It is not a once-and-done. The transformative learning potential in collaboratively defining, framing, reframing, and analyzing through scholarly lenses is enhanced by IS as the educators can return to the tools over and over, as they are stumped to clarify and generate a PoP sufficiently robust to take root as a testable theory of action. Even with accounting for personal preference, our practitioner-scholars find use of IS tools more useful for defining and addressing problems than qualitative research not enhanced by this suite of tools.

Chief among our students' preferred tools are those that are used early in the Mintrop (2016) cycle including the 5 Whys, fishbones, and driver diagrams. These tools assist our scholar-practitioners and their teams to fully consider the proposed PoP by drilling down to the root of the cause. That is, the 5 Whys asks a series of five why questions. Fishbones are a visual way to conceptualize cause and effect as applied to the problem. Driver diagrams assist teams by listing perceived changes coupled by possible solutions that may result in improvement.

We believe our students prefer these tools for several reasons: (1) practice-minded educators can use them easily, (2) the EdD student can surface assumptions that may block equity-based PoPs and theories of action, and (3) the tools can be used repeatedly and in a variety of situations. As the development of the revised qualitative course continues, we hope to incorporate more tools and explore how they enhance the full cycle of inquiry, perhaps suggesting some tools over others for certain parts of the process.

The Second Course: Reconceptualized Transformative Capstone

Because we have both students who begin their doctoral studies with us and students who come to us with their superintendent's endorsement seeking further advancement by attaining their EdD, the second course was conceived as an initiative for both groups of students to build community within their educational spaces and remedy any gaps in their current and past doctoral studies. More specifically, in this course, students will grapple with their identities, embrace social justice as a cross cutting theme, revisit CPED's (2021) guiding principles and concepts, and complete a preliminary literature review and conceptual framework.

Funds of Identity

In our PK12 schools, more than 50 percent of students, less than 20 percent of teachers, 22 percent of principals, and 6 percent of superintendents identify as Black, Indigenous, and/or People of Color (BIPoC) (Radd et al., 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Moreover, it is expected that the composition of the PK12 student population will continue to diversify while the teaching and administrative force remains predominately white (Irwin et al., 2022). Therefore, to best serve the needs of our increasingly diversified and underrepresented student population, it is critical for our school leaders to become more responsive to the needs of their students and families rather than further perpetuating inequity (Rivera-McCutchen, 2014).

In order to embark on this critical work, it is imperative that our doctoral students and practicing school leaders become well versed in grappling with their individual identities in order to best serve all students and families within their PK12 spaces. Funds of identity (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014) provides a structure to participate in

this critical work and serves as a catalyst for our practitioner-scholars to bring this self-work into their schools.

Because identity is a social construct, where “it is not possible to state any specific definition of identity is the correct one and other wrong...funds of knowledge become funds of identity when people actively internalize family and community resources to make meaning and to describe themselves” (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014, pp. 32-33). We utilize the practitioner friendly examples provided in this research, including the self-portrait, a visual display describing who you are in this moment, and significant circle which is a summary using a single-page representation of their most important objects, activities, people, institutions, and hobbies (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014). These foundational strategies begin the process of grappling with one’s identity. Following this self-work, in community, we dialogue about not only our individual identities but relate these social constructions to the students’ prior understanding of the levels of systemic inequity, including the historical, structural, institutional, and individual/interpersonal facets (Radd et al., 2021).

Social Justice as a Crosscutting Theme

Given our previous dialogue on funds of identity and because our space, place, and time demands it, it is critical for our practitioner-scholars to critically engage in social justice as a crosscutting theme in their dissertation journey. Although we try our best to infuse social justice throughout our students’ program of study, we intentionally block social justice as a crosscutting theme in this second methodology class because the students are in the process of authentically engaging with their school communities to develop their PoP, where social justice resides as the heartbeat of their future research. Based upon the input from our previous doctoral students, we include the following social justice thematic blasts: transformative leadership, culturally responsive pedagogy, countering deficit thinking with asset-based practices, equitable assessment, and justice-based community collaboration.

Revisiting the CPED Guiding Principles and Concepts

As a learning community, we revisit the CPED guiding principles and concepts (CPED, 2021). That is, based upon these principles and concepts, we further process out and crosswalk our preliminary understandings of framing our questions around equity, ethics, and social justice as applied to our developing PoPs, making a positive and sustainable difference within our schools and with our greater school communities, enhancing our research-in-collaboration plans with a keen eye on authenticating the collaborative process, developing our practitioner-scholar expertise by integrating our practical and research knowledge in an effort to transform our PreK-12 educational spaces (CPED, 2021).

Writing a Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Given the work completed in the first course coupled with the activities in the second course, our students revisit the processes of writing a literature review and conceptual framework. This activity is designed as a writing salon. That is, the students are placed in peer writing groups and have scheduled salons with agendas set by their professor, participate in at least two 1-to-1 writing review sessions with their professor, and writing workshops facilitated by our university librarians. Though the students are coached that they are

developing preliminary literature reviews and conceptual frameworks where these parts are organic and will be updated across their dissertation journeys, this process is beneficial for them because they are writing in community, an important skill when they are writing their full dissertations and are given the opportunity to have multiple sets of eyes review their work to offer constructive criticism. Given the restructured design introduced in this essay, we pivot to some practical recommendations when transitioning to a restructured two-part methodological course sequence.

TRANSITIONING TO A RESTRUCTURED TWO-PART RESEARCH DESIGN COURSE SEQUENCE

Realistically, because our plates are overflowing, restructuring research design courses in CPED-influenced and practitioner-focused doctoral programs seems like a daunting task. It does take work, commitment, and collaboration at the university that mirrors what we prescribe for schools, resulting in less time for other professional and personal obligations, but this work is necessary. To paraphrase one of our colleagues, sometimes we forget the overarching reason we became faculty was to serve as transformative leaders ourselves. That is, we must continuously self-reflect on the notion that as facilitators of knowledge in academia, we must strive to serve and support our students through innovative curriculum and pedagogical choices in order to provide the doctoral experiences our adult learners deserve and the transformative leaders the schools require.

One recommendation is to embark on this work as a collaborative endeavor. Only with curricular coherence and commitment to core principles on our part can the EdD candidates make the shift to transformative leadership praxis that is our aspiration for them all. To kickstart this collaboration, we highly suggest attending the annual CPED convening with your colleagues to energize your team as they begin or continue this work. In our department, we have had success with this strategy, across several years through multiple memberships, because we bottle our synergy from the convening and extend our conversations from the convening space to the departmental conference room. Similarly, to keep the momentum going, our team is actively involved in the multiple supports sponsored by CPED, like the improvement groups (CIGs), recurring webinars, and online resources.

Our vision for our EdD graduates places upon us the responsibility to provide ways to build transformative leadership capacity, and we have taken the step of integrating two final-semester courses as one way to accomplish this. We are asking our candidates to change their ways of working and to shift their thinking about the nature of the dissertation even as we face the same challenges as a PK12 leadership preparation faculty. This collaboration between the capstone seminar instructor and the qualitative methodologist is a beginning for us, as we continue to develop our EdD program as a practitioner-forward, rigorous, and transformative experience that supports more equitable educational systems in PK12 and higher education.

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