


# Transformative Learning and Professional Advancement During an EdD Program

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to examine education doctoral student perspectives on their experience of enrolling in a fully online EdD program during a global pandemic and achieving career advancement during their enrollment through the lens of transformative learning theory. A qualitative study of 12 participants was conducted to examine in what ways the pandemic influenced their decision to enroll in an online doctorate program, in ways their thinking progressed throughout the program, and the factors affecting their decision to take on a career advancement while enrolled in the program. The findings indicate that there were elements of transformative learning that occurred for many of the participants. Faculty teaching in doctorate programs are encouraged to explore how they might foster transformative learning experiences for their students.

## KEYWORDS

*education doctorate, transformative learning theory, career advancement, pandemic*

## INTRODUCTION

Whether apparent at the outset or realized later, doctoral program enrollees are likely to encounter the awareness that nearly 50% of students do not complete their degrees (Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2019). These statistics were compiled during what is commonly termed as normal circumstances, a label ill-fitting for the global pandemic. While the latest completion rates for doctoral students during the pandemic are still in the process of calculation, it is conceivable that heightened demands on students' academic, emotional, and mental well-being became pervasive. Numerous studies documented the measures adopted by doctoral programs to pivot from in-person to fully remote models, adapting to the shifting landscape of higher education in response to the pandemic (Brochu et al., 2021; Bukko & Dhesi, 2021; Capello, 2023; DeMartino, 2021; Hutching & Stevenson, 2021). With the reopening of physical classrooms in higher education, there arises a contemplation of the path forward—whether to continue online or revert to in-person learning. Regardless of the chosen mode, the objective of Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) influenced doctoral programs remains steadfast: “The professional doctorate in education prepares educators for the application of appropriate and specific practices, the generation of new knowledge and for the stewardship of the profession” (n.d. para. 6).

However, despite the pre-pandemic discouraging attrition rate in doctoral program completion, limited research delves into why students opted for enrollment in online doctorate programs amidst the peak uncertainty of the pandemic. This study sought to examine doctoral students' perspectives concerning their decision to enroll in a fully online EdD program during a global pandemic and attain

career advancement while enrolled, employing the lens of transformative learning theory.

## EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT OF THE ONLINE EDD PROGRAM

The EdD program at my university had a unique journey during this tumultuous time. Leading up to the closure of university classrooms in Spring 2020, our School of Education had been diligently creating a brand new, fully online education doctoral program to launch in Fall 2020, with admittance interviews starting in Spring 2020. The inaugural cohort to the online doctoral program began in Fall 2020, with the second cohort beginning in Spring 2021. Each fall and spring semester, a new cohort enters the program, with Cohort 7 starting in Fall 2023. In Spring 2021, the program became a CPED member.

It is a three-year part-time program based upon a cohort model to help create a community of practitioners from a diversity of geographic locations and professions, such as K-12, higher education, non-profit organizations, healthcare, and government sectors. The program is structured around asynchronous classes supplemented by optional synchronous sessions, coupled with social gatherings hosted twice by instructors during each semester. Students complete a Dissertation in Practice (DiP) by the end of their program.

In my role as faculty teaching the first and second cohorts, I was curious to explore if we were fostering and triggering transformative learning for our inaugural cohorts of students. Furthermore, I aimed to assess whether these learning experiences



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were perceived by students as significant factors in their decisions to pursue a career advancement while still actively enrolled. The review of existing literature emphasizes the suitability of transformative learning theory as a theoretical framework for investigating students' experiences during this specific period.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

My research was guided by transformative learning theory to explore the experiences of doctoral students during this unique period. Transformative learning theory, as delineated by Mezirow (1978, 1992, 1996, 2000), has previously been explored in diverse settings and contexts prior to the pandemic (Ginsberg et al., 2014; Pugh, 2011; Stevens, 2010; Stevens-Long et al., 2012; Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Transformative learning, with its foundation with Mezirow's (2000) theory, has been widely accepted as a theory of adult theory that guides both research and practice.

According to research (Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Mezirow, 1990, 1996; Taylor, 1990), as students enter the educational setting, they all bring different assumptions, beliefs, and perceptions to make sense of the world around them. Transformational learning experiences encompass profound shifts in their perspectives, beliefs, and understanding. These experiences often arise from encounters with disorienting dilemmas that challenge their existing beliefs and that prompt critical reflection and reevaluation of existing knowledge. In this process, learners engage in self-reflection, challenging assumptions, and exploring new perspectives. Transformational learning involves a deep shift in perspective, from a more routine or habitual mindset to a more open, adaptable, and reflective one (Mezirow, 2000; Mezirow & Associates, 1990). This type of learning can lead to personal growth, expanded consciousness, and enhanced problem-solving abilities. It often occurs in contexts where individuals are exposed to diverse perspectives, engage in dialogue, and confront their preconceptions.

In particular, Mezirow (1978) identified 10 phases of learning that reflect the transformative learning process: 1. A disorienting dilemma, 2. Self-examination, 3. A critical assessment of assumptions, 4. Recognition of a connection between one's discontent and the process of transformation, 5. Exploration of new roles, relationships, and actions, 6. Planning a course of action, 7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan, 8. Provisional trying of new roles, 9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships, and 10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective. The overall essence of Mezirow's (date) transformative learning theory is summarized as such: "To make meaning means to make sense of an experience; we make an interpretation of it. When we subsequently use this interpretation to guide decision making or action, then making meaning becomes learning" (p. 1).

While Mezirow's work in 1978 delineated ten phases of transformative learning, Taylor (2009), underscored six core elements that construct a transformative teaching approach, aligning cohesively with Mezirow's (date) aforementioned ten phases. In the context of this research, Taylor's (date) articulated six core elements were adopted as the theoretical framework to facilitate the analysis of interview data from doctoral participants. Taylor's (2009) framework identifies six core elements: individual experience, promoting critical reflection, dialogue, holistic orientation, awareness of context, and authentic relationships. Taylor (2009) notes that

these fundamental elements have been synthesized from numerous literature reviews and remain a work in progress. These six core elements will be further elaborated upon with supporting in vivo coding derived from participant responses.

Cranton and Taylor (2012) provide a more detailed explanation that while transformative learning results in a profound shift in perspective characterized by inclusivity and critical thinking, the way individuals undergo this kind of learning can differ based on their individuality, context, or specific circumstances. "It may be that for one person in one context, transformative learning is a rational endeavor; for that same person in another context, it could be emotional and intuitive; in some contexts, social change may need to precede individual change, and in another context, individual transformation drives social transformation" (Cranton & Taylor, 2012, p.3). The chosen in vivo quotes aim to partially capture the distinct manners in which the participants conveyed a transformation in their learning during the program.

In addition to Taylor's (date) six core elements of fostering transformative learning, Jarvis (2006) offers an additional model and insights into adult learning. According to Jarvis (2006), a learner can go through a continuous process of transformative learning by thinking, doing, and feeling, each occurring in any combination, and producing different types of learning: critical thinking, problem solving, reflective learning, and action learning. Learners can change because of these three different types of learning: increasing self-confidence and self-esteem, placing new meaning on the world and events, and becoming more capable and experienced in handling similar situations. The analysis of research and selection of in vivo quotes to capture participants' personal and descriptive articulations of their learning experiences were informed by Jarvis' Learning Process (2006) and Mezirow's (date) transformative learning theory as aligned with Taylor's (date) six core elements. These frameworks facilitated a comprehensive exploration of the participants' narratives.

This literature review led me to question whether the pandemic could be conceptualized as an example of Mezirow's (date) disorienting dilemmas that could apply to all students. Certainly, one can even imagine that enrolling in a doctorate program could constitute a disorienting dilemma by itself; however, I was curious about those individuals who made the choice to introduce a potential additional disorienting dilemma into their lives for the ensuing three years, alongside the already challenging backdrop of the pandemic.

## PARTICIPANTS AND STUDY DESIGN

This study aimed to employ a qualitative approach, enabling students to delve deeply into their experiences and offer nuanced insights regarding the situational intricacies underpinning their decision-making, rational thoughts, and emotional responses. To comprehend the participants' experiences comprehensively, the research questions, aligned with specific prompts within the semi-structured interview protocol, were examined through thematic analyses as they aligned with Taylor's (2009) six core elements of transformative learning. The following research questions guided the data collection and analysis:

**Research Question 1:** In what ways did the pandemic influence your decision to enroll in an EdD program?

**Research Question 2:** In what ways did the EdD program influence your decision to accept a career advancement while being enrolled?



## Participants

Data were gathered from 12 participants who were actively enrolled in an online EdD program at a private institution situated outside a metropolitan area on the east coast. The researcher initiated the data collection process by disseminating an announcement via Canvas to students in both Cohort One (commenced in Fall 2020) and Cohort Two (commenced in Spring 2021), inviting their participation in a semi-structured interview. The recruitment criteria stipulated that participants must be affiliated with either Cohort One or Two and should have achieved career advancement during their program enrollment. The resultant response comprised six participants (four females, two males) from Cohort One ( $n=28$ ; yielding a 21% response rate) and a similar number (five females, one male) from Cohort Two ( $n = 44$ ; generating a 14% response rate).

I adopted an open-ended method to ascertain the participants' individual interpretations of career advancement, ensuring inclusivity across various professions and roles represented among our students. This approach acknowledged the potential divergence from the conventional administrative trajectory within the K-12 school system. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the university granted approval for the research proposal, and all interviews were conducted during the fall semester of 2022, resulting in one or two subsequent semesters until their program completion. To safeguard confidentiality, each participant was designated with a unique identifier (P1-P12).

## Data Collection and Analysis

The participants engaged in a semi-structured interview consisting of 16 questions conducted via Zoom by the researcher. The interviews were subsequently downloaded into Panopto for the purpose of adding captions. Coding and thematic analysis techniques were employed to capture the participants' experiences and thoughts as they aligned with Taylor's (2009) six core elements of transformative learning. Notably, in vivo coding was predominantly utilized to accurately capture the participants' experiences, thoughts, and expressions in the most direct manner possible, reflecting how they made sense of their lives, assigned significance to their encounters, and interpreted those experiences (Merriam et al., 2009). The interview responses, transcribed using Panopto, were imported into Delve and initially categorized based on the responses to the survey questions. Following several rounds of coding, distinct themes surfaced, and the researcher subsequently chose quotes that most aptly represented the six core elements delineated by Taylor (2009).

## Disorienting Dilemma and Decision to Enroll

For the participants in focus, the pivotal decision to enroll in an inaugural, fully online education doctoral program during the midst of a global pandemic carried a great deal of significance. All participants engaged in reflection regarding the rationale behind their decisions and the aspirations they hoped to achieve by enrolling. Transformative learning often includes the learner experiencing a disorienting dilemma, causing them to question their deeply held assumptions and beliefs. Consequently, this sparks the individual to engage in critical discourse and critical self-reflection related to their changing assumptions and beliefs (Mezirow, 1992; 2000; 2009). In this instance, I theorized that the global pandemic served as such a

disorienting dilemma. While some shared specific challenges encountered by the pandemic, others recognized it as an opportune moment for action. While a subset attributed their program enrollment directly to the pandemic's influence, others conveyed that the decision was aptly timed, irrespective of the pandemic's circumstances.

Upon enrollment, participants held the subsequent roles: three participants were school principals, two were public school district administrators, two held positions as higher education administrators, two were classroom teachers, one was a professional coach, one was a program director in higher education, and one was a public school teacher on sabbatical.

The following list comprises aggregated factors reported by participants for their enrollment in our EdD program during the pandemic academic year (Fall 2020 - Spring 2021): The fully online nature of the program, expedited time to completion, financial considerations, family support, the cohort-based structure, geographical proximity and the presence of a physical campus, the university's reputation, the program's name, lack of emphasis on superintendent endorsement, and the personalized interactions with the recruiting office and faculty. The global pandemic afforded participants an increased opportunity to engage in critical self-reflection, analyzing their own capabilities and possibilities. This introspection afforded them the opportunity and motivation to determine the most suitable steps to advance their progress toward achieving both their professional and personal aspirations.

## FINDINGS

The findings of the in vivo coding and thematic analysis of the participants' responses to the semi-structured interview protocol were synthesized to address the two research questions. Analyzing the coded responses entailed investigating potential transformative learning themes taking place during the participants' coursework, through their time of career advancement, and to the scheduled Fall 2022 interview. This section presents Taylor's (2009) six core elements of transformative learning with supporting in vivo quotes. Although I chose quotes that I believed closely resonated with the six core elements, it became apparent that there exists a notable degree of fluidity among these elements. This fluidity emerged due to the nuanced nature of participants' responses, which often exhibited compatibility with multiple core elements simultaneously. Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge the interconnected nature of all six core elements, which are intricately linked to the overarching theoretical framework of transformative learning theory (Taylor, 2009). Each of the core elements, woven interrelatedly into the theoretical framework, provides a lens to help guide transformative learning in the education setting.

## Six Core Elements of Transformative Learning

### 1. Individual Experience

Each learner brings prior experiences, which serves as a starting point for critical reflection and discourse, as well as experiences that are created in the classroom. Having both of these experiences are not enough in that the learner must self-examine these experiences through critical reflection and dialogue. It appears that the depth of life experiences that students bring to the classroom offers them a richer source for reflection. Prior experiences, coupled

with course activities, readings, and dialogue with peers and the instructor, can serve as a catalyst for a new perspective.

A participant shared her account of grappling with her leadership capabilities stemming from past experiences, wherein a lack of comprehensive understanding of leadership hindered her perceived success in those roles. Nevertheless, enrolling in the program afforded her a fresh perspective. She detailed how her valuable prior experiences, coupled with a new understanding of leadership, were harnessed to equip her with the tools to emerge as an effective leader.

The biggest aha was the way everybody can be an incredibly successful leader...making sure that they have a team around them. That makes the leadership work...it was like completely perspective changing for me...I could be autistic and be a leader...that was the greatest moment for me the first semester was that I actually could, despite my disabilities, absolutely be a leader. (P2)

Another participant reflected upon the program's capacity in enabling her to enhance her identity and skill set, both within the program and in her professional world. This significant connection of personal and professional advancement was highlighted as a meaningful achievement resulting from the program.

One of the biggest aha moments for me personally is how much I've already accomplished outside of the program...This just added a lot of validation not just from all of you, but just for myself. I'm getting the information I need from the program to go out and create that myself. (P8)

In reflecting upon an extensive and successful career, a participant confessed that she still battled with professional insecurities. Yet, the academic achievements realized through the program, coupled with career progression and a reduction in pandemic-induced fears, collectively empowered her to embrace a fresh outlook on life.

I'm probably not the only person that shared the sort of that imposter syndrome sort of not really having a sense of ...can I really do this? Do I really have that skill set and made up for this? "And I think it's a battle I fight regularly, if not daily and so being in this program and progressing academically is providing some validation for me that I actually am ...okay as a student...and getting a position that I never imagined that I would ever be qualified for. This is something I personally never imagined...that fear of my mortality during the pandemic is gone... It's absolutely life changing. (P7)

These reflections support the importance of encouraging students to reflect on their previous experiences, how they relate to new concepts, and how they can begin to envision new personal and professional possibilities. Creating opportunities for students to take part in these types of reflective classroom experiences optimizes student engagement but also respects their individuality and their own learning journey throughout the program.

## 2. Critical Reflection

Promoting learners to engage in questioning the integrity of deeply held assumptions and beliefs based upon prior and classroom experience. This form of critical reflection involves how students perceive, think, feel, and respond to the course content. This type of questioning can be prompted in response to an awareness of conflicting thoughts, feelings, and actions, and at times

can lead to a perspective transformation (Mezirow, 2000). Berger's (2004) research uses the phrase "edge of knowing" as she was looking for "the kind of reflection that seeks to create new forms of thinking, new discoveries - reflection that takes us to the edge of our meaning" (p. 338).

A participant explained that engaging in critical reflection compelled her to envision herself as a leader extending beyond her current role. This account seems to resonate with Berger's (2004) notion that reflection should push students to discover their broader significance.

I do think that having confidence to do something that you're not comfortable with is different. You can have confidence in something that you are familiar with or, you know, but having confidence to stretch yourself in something that is very new. And I think that part of the program has you constantly reflecting and thinking about things you know differently. I think that the opportunity to constantly reflect about self as a leader probably had me not think of self as a leader necessarily of just school and education. When I got out of the mind of me being a leader at my school to just being how am I a leader? (P11)

An additional participant expressed how her deeply held beliefs and assumptions regarding leadership were subjected to questioning, resulting in a transformative shift in her perspective on the subject.

I was able to see some subtleties in leadership and that it takes all sorts. Leadership takes on different characteristics at different times. It's just it's not just the highest paid person in the building, necessarily...I really developed a more encompassing definition of leadership. (P1)

This participant acknowledged that her previous strategies to handle conflict needed to change if she were to be an effective leader for her program. By honestly evaluating her capabilities and limitations, she explained how she knew that she needed to actively work to improve a particular area of growth.

Had to come face to face with the fact that I avoid conflict...I needed to start pushing back and not just going with the flow because I don't like conflict and don't like people getting angry. If I wasn't in this program, I think that where I am now and where the team is now, would look very different because I don't think I would have been as competent to try to intervene or try to do things differently...I definitely would say that my confidence has increased...I do think that being in this program has helped me be able to start to push back differently. (P12)

In these accounts, the participants have underscored the significance of critical self-reflection within the program, which facilitated a heightened self-awareness essential for ongoing learning and adaptability in response to evolving circumstances.

## 3. Dialogue

With the self and others by becoming the arena in which experience and critical reflection play: "Dialogue becomes the medium for critical reflection to be put into action, where experience is reflected on, assumptions and beliefs are questioned and habits of minds are ultimately transformed" (Mezirow et al., 2009, p. 9). Learners must be offered conducive circumstances for dialogue to facilitate their expression of how they are constructing meaning in the world. Berger (2004) encourages finding the learner's "edge of meaning" to create a "space that we can come to terms with limitations of our knowing and begin to stretch those limits" (p. 338).





Diverse learners will each find unique methods to challenge themselves in order to facilitate the transformation of their learning and decision-making.

One participant acknowledged the realization of how powerful qualitative research can help in fostering critical reflection to help make positive change beyond an individual's organization. She states that she learned to:

Get involved in more qualitative research opportunities...helping to give voice to people's stories so that they can be heard in a different way and to create change. To facilitate change, then that's what I want to do... it's that ripple impact that... creating change within the organization is one thing but being able to create change or facilitate change through finding a way to amplify people's voices and their stories and their experiences through a qualitative research mechanism, then I think that that can have an impact that ripples out far beyond just the organizational walls. (P5)

Another participant echoed this sentiment of wanting to make positive change beyond individual and organizational confines. This sentiment is driven by a commitment to uphold personal values on consistently making ethical decisions.

I want to make change for all. Society. Not just for myself. Not just for my kids. Not just for our future. But for everybody. To make life different... it's made me a more confident leader, more credible leader, a lifelong learner...Never give up on things that you know are right. And I think that's a value that's instilled in me...for the rest of my life...to empower people's voices. (P9)

Another participant detailed the interrelatedness between self-reflection and impact on actions, emphasizing that transformative learning requires a noticeable and tangible outcome from this reflective process.

You have to be a leader in all spaces and if you don't have the awareness around your impact and the way that you say things and what you're saying on others, then how is this really sitting with you? Do people actually want to be different or not? A requirement around awareness. Reflection is important. What meaning are you making out of this? How are you connecting it to what you're doing? It's the effort of self-reflection... It's more than just learning what it means to be a leader from a theoretical perspective is like, how are you actually modeling this?...I don't know that you can be a leader without being open to learning and reflecting. It's been such an important part of me being in this program is the real reminder that I need to be honest with, you know, my impact on other people and how things impact me, because otherwise I can't show up and be present to people. (P12)

These quotes exemplify a fundamental aspect of transformative learning theory, which revolves around "teaching for change, not simply understanding as a purely cognitive insight, but where there is a desire for learners to act within and on their world in more empowering ways" (Merizow et al., 2009, p. 277). Creating classroom experiences that foster student self-dialogue and with others empowers them to engage in critical self-reflection which is a cornerstone of effective leadership, as it contributes to personal growth, self-awareness, ongoing learning, and a more positive impact on their teams and the wider professional world.

#### 4. Holistic Orientation

How one engages with their learning that is beyond the cognitive level, such as at the affective and relational level. Affective knowing is described as having an awareness of one's feelings and emotions during the reflective process of engaging in critical reflection that prompts the learner to question deeply held assumptions. Taylor (2009) summarizes from Brown (2006) that "learners rarely change through a rational process (analyze-think-change) but rather they are 'more likely to change in a see-feel-change sequence" (p. 10). Numerous participants in this study noted that assuming the role of researchers and gaining confidence in that role represented a profound shift in their self-identity.

One participant articulated how program enrollment correlated with a seeing and feeling of heightened self-confidence culminating in an observable change: their choice to pursue a promotion earlier than initially planned.

The reality of the pandemic and the stresses that that brought both personally and professionally, I think shifted my mindset. I think that there was an element of confidence that was developed by being in a doctoral program and knowing that I was progressing towards the final stages...I definitely used that in my cover letter, I used it when I talked about my dissertation topic...in my interviews as well. I think everything just got bumped up by a year because of those factors of the pandemic and probably the element of competence that I had within the program. (P6)

This participant described how the program played a pivotal role in shaping their self-identity, emphasizing the emphasis on evolving as a scholar practitioner. Attaining the ability to perceive oneself in this capacity stimulates a transformative self-perspective, fostering ongoing commitment to professional pursuits through research beyond program enrollment.

Get students to start seeing themselves as research practitioners...Not separate, but that's who they are. I think that could be pretty profound. It is a shift in how you see yourself. You really go from whatever you were when you came into the program and you still may be doing that at the end of the program, but you were now a scholarly practitioner...there's something to be said for that, because I think if there's not that shift, there's always the danger of short changing yourself. (P5)

While discussing the program's impact on their learning journey, this participant highlighted a significant transformation in their approach to coursework. They emphasized a shift from perceiving coursework as merely transactional to instilling it with profound significance and relevance, recognizing its potential to enrich both their personal and professional worlds. Fostering a holistic orientation to teaching encourages learners to develop heightened awareness of their emotions, delve into their distinct processes of meaning-making, and cultivate a deeper comprehension of their personal self-perception.

"I'm going to really focus on topics that are interesting, things that I need to learn. I'm going to do it in such a way that it has some type of meaning for me... it was not about the grade or the score. It became much more about how is this relevant or meaningful for me? (P11)

For doctoral students in particular, Contreras and Bedford (2023) highlight how the journey of developing research skills, growing as an academic, and responding critically to problems of practice is

transformative in nature. “The doctoral candidate transforms from an expert in their respective field to a scholar-practitioner by absorbing new ideas, information, and experiences. Their interpretation of what they need and how they themselves in the process grows and changes” (p. 25). The chosen quotes help support that this transformational process encompasses cognitive aspects but also involves shifts towards heightened awareness and emotional responses as they reevaluate their experiences and envision a new self-identify.

## 5. Awareness of Context

Developing a deeper appreciation and understanding of the personal, professional, and sociocultural factors that could influence the transformative learning process. “These factors include the surroundings of the immediate learning event, the personal and professional situation of the learners at the time (their prior experience), and the background context that is shaping society” (Taylor, 2009, p. 11). Taylor (2009) claims that “participants with recent experiences of critical incidences in their lives seemed more predisposed to change” (p.12). Undoubtedly, the pandemic could be regarded as a critical incidence; however, numerous students were also encountering supplementary significant events that played a role in reshaping their learning experiences and triggering a change in mindset.

While conveying the transformative influence of an ethics and social justice class within the program, this participant communicated how it shaped their perception of their potential to bring about positive change for others.

Ethics and social justice...the empowerment that I felt through taking that course was life changing because I never would have done the things that I did. You had to stand up for the injustices and you had to be courageous and you had to have those courageous conversations in order to enact change...I really wouldn't have been prompted to be an advocate...I really wouldn't have been prompted to see myself as a leader. I feel like in that class I had this shift in mindset. (P9)

This participant detailed a profound shift in their perspective concerning the challenges confronting the educational landscape, as well as their motivation and values driving them to effect positive change that extends beyond a single organization.

I want instead of one school doing a great job, I want to see the Archdiocese look at this as something that honestly... we are morally obligated to implement because we say these are our values and I'm just not going to stop saying it...I never really saw this as a civil rights issue. But it is. (P1)

Reiterating a comparable sentiment regarding the program's impact on their view of equity, this participant described a transformative shift in their self-concept and perspective that will continue to influence and shape their future actions and decision-making.

How I treat other people relationally, how I orient myself to my vision, how I see social justice... I've always been an advocate for social justice, but being very intentional about how that looks like in processes is going to be a part of my professional rhythm and already is really from a curricular standpoint and an instructional delivery standpoint, teaching kids how to relate to each other, but whenever I have a larger organization that

might have inequity built into it, what am I going to do to change that? (P10)

These participants conveyed a fresh sense of self-awareness and comprehension regarding their values, motivations, and behaviors in connection with comprehending the societal context in which they operate, as well as in broader future contexts. This transformative shift in self-awareness and insight enables them to make informed decisions that align with their authentic selves and lead with integrity.

## 6. Authentic Relationships

Refers to the importance of developing positive and productive relationships with others as a key factor in fostering transformative learning experiences. “It is through building trusting relationships that learners develop the confidence to deal with learning on an affective level, where transformation at times can be perceived as threatening and an emotionally charged experience” (Taylor, 2009 p. 13). Through authentic relationships, teachers develop a deep awareness of the needs and interests of their learners, help learners develop a strong sense of self-awareness, create an environment to be genuine with them and their peers, foster opportunities for learners to engage in critical reflection and critical self-reflection, and demonstrates an awareness of how context shapes practice (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004).

While describing the academic and emotional hurdles encountered during the program, this participant underscored the vital importance of faculty offering essential support to foster their achievement.

This is too much work and I have to redo everything and I'm melting down and I don't think I can do it. I think every semester, I've had about two weeks where I just fall apart and can't do anything and I've never had a professor do anything other than say, Hey, that's cool. You want me to help you? Like, No, you take the time you need...and that comfort has been everything to me. (P2)

Numerous participants remarked on effectiveness of the cohort model and the power of the relationships created throughout the program. A participant elaborated on how cultivating genuine connections influenced their professional growth and personal development. These quotes are consistent with transformative learning literature of the positive effects of peer dynamics (Capello, 2023; Ginsberg et al., 2014; Taylor, 2007) and supportive learning environments (Cranton, 2006; Cranton & Carusetta, 2004).

We are still close, thick as thieves, and we do our work together. We connect on things outside of class. So the EdD program, just by structure and by academics, have helped me really connect in very different ways personally with my colleagues and my classmates by structure and by design...[they] provided a huge support for me and still do...has helped maintain [me] through both the pandemic and the civil unrest. (P7)

Other participants observed a transformative change in their perceptions of the significance of establishing genuine relationships beyond the educational setting and within their professional roles. This change in mindset can be described how a “personal transformation leads to alliances with others of like mind to work toward effecting necessary changes in relationships, organizations, and systems” (Mezirow, 1992, p. 252). This change in perception



can lead to more informed, thoughtful, and strategic decisions that benefit both the team and the organization.

It also taught me that I needed to build credibility. I feel like those things really shifted everything. You can't make decisions without having the right people at the table and by right people is who's being impacted by the decision you're about to make... who's not at the table that should be and who's going to be impacted by the decision I'm about to make...I feel like those are also those principles I've installed in my office too. We slowed down and we built the relationships. I do just feel like a different person, a different leader because of it. (P9)

There is value in making connections and especially with people who value the same things that the program values...adjusting the internal mindset towards...I'm not just going to stay in the position where I'm at, but I'm actually going to take this and use it to help change the world. (P10)

This participant echoed a parallel shift in perspective, emphasizing an increased recognition of the significance of cultivating compassionate relationships.

I look at everything very differently now...I think more self-aware... Care for others. Care for the people that you are leading...I think that's been my one of my really bigger shifts is genuinely understanding and caring about the people in the work, including myself. (P11)

Participants reflected upon a mindset shift that fosters empathy and understanding through building authentic relationships. Leaders who reflect on their experiences and perspectives are more likely to empathize with the challenges and viewpoints of their team members. This empathetic stance nurtures positive relationships, effective communication, and a supportive work environment.

Throughout these narratives, participants referred to their changing self-identities, mind shifts, and worldviews and what they needed to confront within themselves in order to grow personally and professionally. Jarvis (2006) explains transformative learning occurs when a learner "encounters an experience in her social context, one that cannot be automatically accommodated or assimilated. This creates a disjunction between one's biography and the experience, a state of unease that can trigger learning" (Merriam et al, 2007, pp. 101-102). With several references to the emotions that the participants were feeling, Jarvis (2006) explains that "it is perhaps through the emotions that thought can be transformed into action...the emotions can have a considerable effect on the way we think, on motivation and on beliefs, attitudes, and values" (p. 11).

## DISCUSSION

A qualitative analysis of 12 EdD participants' responses provided rich evidence related to the theory of transformative learning. The study supports the notion that transformative learning was fostered in a cohort of online education doctoral students, as not only evidenced by their career advancement during their program but also by the reflective responses provided during the interview. Participants reported personal development, heightened self-awareness, and a recognition of the shift from initial apprehension and self-doubt to a more confident self-perception. Participants also noted the impact of the program on their professional trajectory by describing an increase in self-confidence, increased sense of self-efficacy to become a leader, shift in mindset, and ability to apply and

reflect upon coursework that was aligned with their professional aspirations.

The core elements of teaching transformative learning, according to Taylor (2009), include individual experience, critical reflection, dialogue, holistic orientation, awareness of context, and authentic relationships. All core elements were reflected throughout the participants' responses but looking across the data, I found that it was difficult to claim that all participants underwent transformative learning through their program. While some participants expressed several ideas that could easily align with the different elements of transformative learning, it might prove difficult to disaggregate them into particular elements or to generalize them across several elements. The research on this topic has shown how complex each core element (individual experience, critical reflection, dialogue, holistic orientation, awareness of context, and authentic relationships) can be for individual learners and for faculty hoping to foster these practices in their classrooms (Mezirow et al., 2009).

Nevertheless, my analysis leads me to believe that numerous narratives corroborate the premise that enrolling in an online doctoral program during the pandemic and progressing through the coursework potentially facilitated transformative learning experiences for many. Numerous accounts recounted shifts in mindset, heightened self-confidence and self-efficacy, and the acquisition of a new lens through which to perceive oneself, the workplace, society, and the world. Kegan (1994) posited that transformation occurs when a learner alters "not just the way he behaves, not just the way he feels, but the way he knows - not just what he knows but the way he knows it" (p. 17). I believe that this notion was echoed in certain narratives, encapsulating the essence of transformative learning while leaving the door open for much added additional research.

Taylor (2009) describes two theoretical orientations to transformative learning found in the literature on this topic. One framework emphasizes personal transformation and growth through critical reflection and self-critique of deeply held assumptions, which result in greater personal awareness in relationship to others. The second orientation emphasizes how individual and social transformation are linked, with learners developing a greater awareness about social change, how to transform society, and their role in it. I support the claim that participants articulated both of these theoretical orientations, expressing their own individual development as well as their aspiration to question, influence, and take action to foster a more just society. Drawing a definitive conclusion that all participants underwent transformative learning throughout their program proves challenging. Even for narratives supporting the assertion of transformative learning experiences, measuring and observing potential impacts beyond the program's duration present considerable difficulties.

## LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations to this study, but in particular, the most pronounced is the timing in which the study took place. The primary aim of this study was to investigate whether the global pandemic influenced students' decision to enroll in an online doctorate program and to explore the factors that shaped their path toward achieving career advancement while being enrolled. Since the role of the pandemic played a significant role in the design of these research questions, and considering the improbable reoccurrence of a similar global event, the timing of this study is a clear limitation. Additionally, participants from different cohorts (Fall

2020 and Spring 2021) engaged with the doctoral program during distinct phases of the pandemic, which might have influenced their responses.

An additional limitation is the sample size. These perspectives were solicited from a specifically chosen cohort of students who met the interview criteria. Participants had to be enrolled in either Cohort 1 (enrolled in Fall 2020) or Cohort 2 (Spring 2021) and who self-reported as obtaining a career advancement during their enrollment in the fully online EdD program. Therefore, due to the narrow sample size, the results may not be generalizable to other online programs. The data for this study stemmed from self-reported insights shared during interviews, wherein participants were prompted to recall past events and thoughts from memory. Under normal circumstances, this would be considered an impact, let alone asking participants to recall emotionally laden and stressful events during a global pandemic. Lastly, the study did not ask questions about or explore the potential influence of race, class, gender, able-bodiedness, sexual orientation, or power dynamics on participants' decision-making and learning experiences. While outside the scope of this research, these inquiries hold promise for future investigations.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The study's potential for replication is constrained by the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic. However, several viable recommendations can be proposed. One such suggestion involves conducting follow-up interviews with the same participant group to investigate the ongoing impact they perceive from their doctoral program after graduation. Mezirow (1990) acknowledges that not all learning is transformative; it is plausible that this type of learning might necessitate a lengthier period to materialize or for individuals to introspect and articulate this form of learning. Subsequent interviews could be purposefully designed with more targeted questions, focusing on program elements pertinent to transformative learning experiences. Additional aspects to explore might encompass detailing the specific roles played by components such as disorienting dilemmas, cohort-style enrollment, communities of practice, faculty and student relationships, fostering of trust, encouragement of critical reflection, and engagement in discourse throughout the program.

Furthermore, there is potential for conducting studies that explicitly employ the transformative learning theoretical framework to shape interview questions for both students and faculty engaged in doctoral programs. This approach would facilitate eliciting viewpoints from both these integral stakeholders. By doing so, a more profound comprehension could be garnered regarding how faculty can enhance the design of transformative learning experiences, resonating more profoundly with students in terms of their personal and professional growth. It is crucial to acknowledge that transformative learning experiences are complex, do not adhere to rigid prescribed methodologies or activities guaranteeing specific outcomes, or even have a high degree of consistency among researchers (Coulter & Mandell, 2014; Cranton & Taylor, 2012).

Cranton and Taylor (2012) explain further the importance of continued research in this area:

Without time spent making sense of these strategies and deconstructing them in relationship to current research, the context where they are applied, and a related theoretical framework, they continue to contribute to the ongoing difficulty

of understanding the relationship between fostering transformative learning and "good" teaching. It may be that some teaching practices have more potential to foster transformative learning than others, or it may be that good teaching always has the potential to foster transformative learning and transformation is dependent on the readiness of the learners, the context in which the teaching takes place, or other factors outside of the teaching practice. (p.15)

Nevertheless, engaging students in dialogues with faculty regarding factors that might foster transformative learning experiences would be a meaningful step. DeSapio (2017) emphasizes the need for sustained transformative learning and calls for further research on fostering this type of learning in educational contexts. This entails bridging the gap between theory and practice, transforming observable transformation into replicable experiences. The concept of establishing consistent, replicable, and sustainable transformative learning experiences holds significant potential for both faculty and doctoral students.

Contreras and Bedford (2023) further explain the significance of involving doctoral students in the discourse regarding the transformative nature of their educational journey, both within the program and in their future endeavors. "The dissertation process, like doctoral course work and the experience as a whole, is a training process meant to assess how adept the doctoral candidate adapts to circumstances, meets challenges, and solves complex problems" (Contreras & Bedford, 2023, p. 25). Nurturing an understanding among doctoral students about the transformative character of their educational journey will empower them to welcome significant shifts in their perspective, adjust their thinking in response to evolving situations, approach decision-making from a fresh standpoint, and act in alignment with their authentic selves.

## CONCLUSION

Research on transformative learning provides valuable insights into the processes of change, growth, and learning among adult learners across time. The participant narratives collected for this study help add to this body of research by sharing specific examples of where transformative learning may have transpired and detailing the ways it occurred. As a CPED-influenced institution, it is clear to see a strong alignment between the CPED Guiding Principles and core elements of transformative learning. Does our EdD program truly foster transformative learning experiences that facilitate the cultivation of new perspectives, influencing both thinking and action in support of leadership endeavors? Have participants transformed their habits of mind through experiential learning, facilitated by critical reflection and dialogue (Jarvis, 2006; Mezirow, 1996)? The narratives give me hope that the program is doing just that, yet numerous questions remain unexplored. Researchers have emphasized that, despite the limited clear signposts or guidelines for understanding the complexities of transformative learning, it fundamentally involves "educating from a particular educational philosophy, with its own assumptions about the purpose of education, the role of the educator, and the nature of knowledge (Cranton & Taylor, 2012, p. 15). As a result, the study of transformative learning presents both opportunities and difficulties for researchers seeking to add to this body of research. There seem to be multiple avenues for further research, assumptions to question regarding transformative learning theory itself, and ongoing discussions about the consistency of how transformative learning can be cultivated. Researchers may





need to strive for more cohesive assertions regarding the practice, research, and theory of transformative learning.

Designing transformative learning experiences to help guide learners through the CPED's Guiding Principles will certainly continue to influence the design, content, and activities of my doctoral classes. Faculty within CPED-influenced institutions who are dedicated to cultivating scholar-practitioners capable of solving complex problems of practice rooted in equity, ethics, and social justice—while emphasizing the creation, transformation, and application of professional knowledge and practice—are encouraged to delve deeper into transformative learning theory to enrich and expand the CPED (2023) Guiding Principles. Despite the need for further research, it remains crucial to persist in the pursuit of transforming students through an educational program, given the remarkable and exciting potential for such transformation.

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