AN APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY INTO EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION DOCTORAL PROGRAMS: STORIES FROM DOCTORAL STUDENTS AT THREE UNIVERSITIES

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Introduction and Purpose

A primary goal of educational administration programs is to adequately prepare school administrators to provide successful public school leadership in urban, suburban, and rural schools. There has been widespread and consistent criticism of educational administration preparation programs and their failure to meet this goal. Often undiscussed and understudied are the students' voices in this conversation, especially those of doctoral students. The purpose of this paper is to identify and describe educational administration doctoral students' positive core of experiences regarding their doctoral program studies and dissertation process using an Appreciate Inquiry (AI) process with five students representing the three doctoral programs. AI is an action research methodology that occurs from a collaborative and participative form of inquiry for discovering, understanding, and fostering generative advances in the organization's function, structure, and processes (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003). As such, AI seeks to strengthen and build human

and organizational capacity as a means of increasing an organization's positive potential. It performs this function through the collaboratively-driven appreciative inquiry into the best in people, their organization, and their context. In doing so, AI advocates that in every organization there are untapped, rich, and inspiring stories that have the potential to serve as the basis for generative growth.

Appreciative inquiry is viewed from five basic principles (Bushe & Kassam, 2005).

1. The constructionist principle is based on Gergen's (1985) work and advocates that human beings are constantly constructing their reality through their interaction with each other and their environment.

2. The principle of simultaneity is based on the notion that inquiry and change occur simultaneously.

3. The poetic principle focuses on the unfolding stories of organizations and their members as they are being co-constructed. As the authors of their stories, they can select the direction of their story.

4. The anticipatory principle is based on the research on positive health, Pygmalion research, inner dialogue research, hope and inspiration, and the science of human strengths (Cooperrider, 2001). In effect, how an organization functions is based on how it envisions and anticipates its future.

5. And, the positive principle that stresses sustained momentum for change is grounded in an affirmation of the working relationships within the organization, the organization's mission and vision, and the belief that positive inquiries sustain positive change.

These principles illustrate the primary differences between AI and many other action research methodologies that are problem-based. As Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) suggest, organizations are unfolding mysteries and not problems to be solved. Consequently,

AI has grown as a method of inquiry, change process, and theoretical perspective (Bushe, 2007; Calabrese, 2006).

Appreciative inquiry has been used internationally in private and public sectors (Whitney & Cooperrider, 2000). At the heart of the AI methodology is the process commonly known as an AI-Summit. It occurs over four days and focuses on the AI 4-D Cycle: discovery, dream, design, and destiny. In the discovery stage, participants seek to identify the best of what exists. In the dream stage, participants seek to imagine what could be. In the design stage, participants seek to determine what should be. And in the destiny stage, participants co-create what will be. Other forms of AI engagement are (a) whole-system 4-D dialogue, (b) mass mobilized inquiry, (c) core group inquiry, (d) positive change network, (e) positive change consortium, (f) AI learning team and progressive AI meetings (Ludema, Whitney, Mohr, & Griffin, 2003). In educational research, AI has been used as a theoretical research perspective as well as methodology.

As a theoretical research perspective, AI has been used in empirical research examining teachers of an at-risk student populations in urban and rural school districts, as well as at-risk students in higher education (Calabrese, Goodvin, & Niles, 2005; Calabrese, Sheppard, Hummel, Laramore, & Nance, 2006; Truschel, 2007). AI has widespread use as a facilitated change process to produce constructive, generative change in schools and neighborhoods in Chicago (Browne, 1999). AI has also been used in school districts as a strategic planning method focused on improving student achievement or strengthening internal and external organizational relationships among administrators, teachers, students, and other stakeholders (Carnell, 2005; Henry, 2003; Morsillo & Fisher, 2007).

It is in this appreciative framework that AI takes holds and lifts the aspirations of participants in the AI process. Moreover, AI's focus on the importance of vision and collaboration aligns with the direction of preparing educational leaders from groups such as the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996). The use of an appreciative inquiry into doctoral students' perspectives of their

educational leadership/administration doctoral programs contrasts with historical problem-based research in the field of educational administration.

An extensive body of deficit-based evidence suggests that educational administration programs need to change to meet the evolving needs of public schools (Hoyle, English, & Steffy, 1985; Levine, 2005; Murphy, 1991; Murphy & Forsyth, 1999). The criticism's intentions were (a) to reform educational administration programs to adequately prepare school administrators to provide successful public school leadership in urban, suburban, and rural schools, and (b) to provide a conceptual framework for educational administration programs to cultivate prospective school leaders who have the capacity to facilitate the creation of enduring and transformational educational systems (Levine, 2005; Murphy, 2003; Pounder & Randall, 2001). Some claim that significant forms of research in educational administration should be concerned with solving important education-related problems (Riehl, Larson, Short, & Reitzug, 2000). The problem-based approach found in this research is endemic to research emanating from higher education. Schein (1987) referred to this tradition in his academic setting:

> [We were] so governed by traditional academic norms that we had difficulty being helpful to each other in achieving our stated goals of gaining some mutual understanding and insights. We found ourselves interrogating the presenter, competing with each other for airtime, arguing with each other about the validity of ideas presented, and generally behaving in a manner that I labeled as 'aggressive,' though some members aggressively denied that there was any aggression present. (p. 14)

In a broad sense, the critics of educational administration programs call for change that uses the traditional problem-solving paradigm. Critics often (a) identify the problem, causes, (b) analyze and generate solutions, and (3) apply a prescription (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider et al., 2003). Traditional problem-solving formulae often do

not take into account knowledge is socially constructed and generative in nature. These formulae frequently avoid consideration of the human process of constructing meaning around the pursuit of worthwhile knowledge and recognition of multiple values that must be considered (English, 2006).

Not all examinations of educational administration programs have been critical. Some researchers have examined educational administration programs and sought to identify successful practices and creative innovations (Jackson & Kelley, 2002). Their research identified program innovations and program outcomes—*not* people and their successful experiences.

One way to reframe the problem-based focus is to change the focus of inquiry. Since all inquiry is heliotropic in nature and yields outcomes based on the direction of the inquiry, a change in the direction of the inquiry will yield different results (Cooperrider, 1999). We applied an AI process to discover program quality, where faculty and students have invested their personal and professional lives. We operated out of the belief that in every educational administration doctoral program, a positive core of experiences exists among and between the program's primary stakeholders: students and faculty. Out of this positive core of experiences, faculty and students often co-construct and evolve doctoral programs to be more productive, accountable, and relevant to address the needs of society and its stakeholders. This study seeks to extend the current literature on effective doctoral programs by identifying and describing educational administration doctoral students' positive experiences regarding their doctoral program studies and dissertation process. In the following sections of this paper, we present our methods, description of the participants, data analysis, findings, and discussion and conclusions.

Methods

We used a qualitative case study design driven by an AI theoretical research perspective to collect data from five participants who are currently enrolled or recently

graduated from educational administration doctoral programs from three universities. Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants because we wanted "to learn something and come to understand something about certain select cases without needing to generalize to all such cases" (Patton, 1986, p. 101). Purposeful sampling allowed us to select a population that was available and met the requirements of a graduate with a doctorate in educational administration; or, was participating in an educational administration doctoral program. We formed boundaries around the case understanding that it is not in the size of the sample but the quality of the knowledge of the participants in the sample (Merriam, 2002; Merriam & Simpson, 2000; Patton, 1986).

We used two primary data collection methods: (a) reflective narratives based on six AI focused inquires related to doctoral programs; and (b) the Left Hand Right Hand Column Case Method (LHRHCCM). The six AI-based questions were purposefully open-ended to promote reflective narratives.

We asked participants to answer the following:

1. Describe a time when you were highly motivated and excited about learning in your doctoral studies. What were the circumstances? Who was involved? Why was it exciting?

2. Describe a time when your learning and experience all came together in praxis when the outcome was beneficial to stakeholders as well as yourself.

3. Describe a faculty member who brought out the best in you. What are some ways the faculty member encouraged you to delve deeper into your academic pursuits?

4. Describe an exciting experience in your doctoral studies that you would use to encourage a best friend to apply to your program. What was it about this experience that you would share with others?

5. Describe the biggest positive change you've seen in yourself as a result of going through your doctoral studies.

6. Describe three things you wish your doctoral program could do to make it more effective.

Participants were also asked to complete the LHRHCCM, a method developed by Argyris and Schon (1996) to identify theories in use and defensive routines. Our decision to use the LHRHCCM as a data gathering method was made because of our desire to maintain the integrity of the study by collecting data that might not be overtly shared. The salient aspects of this method are that it produces data in the form of conversations; the participants construct the meaning in the data; the data elicits the participants' causal theories; and, it provides data in ways that it does not harm the participant or their working context (Argyris, 1995). In the context of our study, we did not speculate if data shared by the participants would be positive or negative. In a traditional AI 4-D Cycle, initial work with participants is to facilitate discernment of pressing issues and linguistically reframe them as affirmative topics (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2003). The LHRHCCM helped to serve that purpose. It has been used in the study of organizations, both public and private (Calabrese, Sherwood, Fast, & Womack, 2004; Mitchell, 2001; Moore, 2004).

Participants

Our sample was one of convenience and our participants were representative of the demographics of the three institutions in which the participants were either enrolled or graduated with their doctorates in educational leadership. Prior to asking them to be part of this study, the first two authors discussed issues such as vulnerability (Kipnis, 2006). As researchers, we were mindful of our relationships with the participants (Wolcott, 2002). With one exception, the first two authors had the participants as students in graduate level programs and served as the major professor to the participants. The third author did not know any of the participants. One of the participants graduated 3-years prior to this study;

three students were in various stages of their doctoral studies; one of the participants graduated from an institution where the researchers had no ties to the institution. Of the three students who were in process, one had less than 1-year affiliation with the researchers; one was in the final year of coursework; and one was writing her dissertation. We were forthcoming with the participants. We asked each participant to not only be a part of the sampling as participants but to also co-present at a national conference and then co-author the findings of the study.

Although the five participants readily agreed to partake in this study as both researchers and participants yielding data, we took special safeguards to ensure the validity of our data and to ensure that the data would be treated in a manner that would protect us from identifying which participants shared what information. We felt bound by the same cautions Wolcott (2002) offered about power and "intimacy in fieldwork and becoming involved with an informant" (p. 111).

The five participants included one male and four women. Two participants graduated with doctorates in educational administration; three are currently enrolled in an educational administration doctoral program. We use the pseudonyms Rita, Len, Francie, Anne, and Trish for participants in the study. Rita is a recent graduate of a large Midwestern doctoral extensive university. She is an assistant professor at a doctoral extensive university. Len is a recent graduate of a large Southern doctoral extensive university. He is principal of a middle school in a large urban school system. Francie is a current doctoral student at a large Southern doctoral extensive university. She is a high school assistant principal in a large urban school system. Anne is currently a student at a Midwestern doctoral intensive university. She is presently writing her dissertation proposal. She is principal of an elementary school in a Midwestern suburban district. Trish is currently a student at a Midwestern doctoral intensive university. She is in the final year of doctoral coursework. She is an assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction at a Midwestern suburban district.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using several analytic techniques: pattern matching, content analysis, and two qualitative software packages—CATPAC and ATLAS.ti. We used CATPAC in the first round of analyzing large quantities of text because each participant's reflective narrative and LHRHCCM's responses were approximately 35 pages in length. CATPAC's fuzzy logic capabilities helped to link words and identify key words that were positively related to each other, and assist in grouping/clustering similar word patterns in the text. These key words were then used in the ATLAS.ti program to search for themes.

The five participants came from three different universities. Given that the same themes ran across all participants who are or were graduates of the three institutions, we believe that the data are valid given the overwhelming saturation of the common themes, the richness in the detail, and our ability to triangulate the data from the initial data we collected and follow-up interviews with the participants. Through member-checking, we verified our interpretations and conclusions with the participants, and we were able to follow the data across participants as well (Denzin, 1994). The primary authors went to great lengths when handling the data. Once participants completed the LHRHCCM, the names of the participants were removed from the data. Once the names of the participants were removed from the data, we analyzed the data independently first, and then compared analysis, primarily the codes and the meanings we associated with the codes. When discrepancies in the analysis emerged, we discussed the data and findings until agreement could be reached (Merriam, 2001). To ensure accuracy, we then presented the data to the participants who were asked to extend ideas, conform our analysis, and provide insights and further analysis. During the stages of data analysis, the names of the participants were cleansed from the data and pseudonyms were created so that the participants could not determine which participant said what.

To ensure reliability and validity in our analysis, we asked participants to review the findings and to provide additional insights. This member-checking technique continued until we were confident that our findings—namely that the overall themes and the patterns within these themes accurately captured the patterns of our participants' thoughts.

Findings

We present how current doctoral students and recent graduates of educational administration doctoral programs identified and described how they have constructed meaning of their experiences in educational administration doctoral programs guided by our overarching question: What are the positive experiences of educational administration doctoral students regarding their doctoral education? Using AI as our theoretical research perspective, we expected our findings would reflect values that appreciated, affirmed, valued, and respected their doctoral programs and faculty. The data indicated two core AI related findings: (a) the student's perception of the level of caring in the doctoral program by program faculty influences the student's perception of program quality; and (b) the caring relationship between the faculty and student extended to the students' work context.

We found that students wanted to tell their stories, and we believe that faculty need to hear what they felt was important. Their stories centered around three forms of relationships (a) the relationship of the faculty member to the student, (b) the relationship of the faculty dissertation major professor to the student, and (c) the relationship the faculty member creates linking theory to the student's work context.

The Caring Relationship of the Faculty Member to the Student

Time. A positive core of experience of all five participants was the relationship between the faculty member and the student. Our participants spoke of the enduring nature of these relationships, and it was through the relationships that they felt "valued and respected." Time was reported as a precursor to the building of the relationships between

the participants and their major professors. For example, Len reported, "she really takes the time to get to know her students. She brings out the best in everyone's personal strengths." His responses addressed time before classes, on the weekends, and the frequent emails and phone calls, that "time with her was never sparse." Len, like other participants who worked full-time as school administrators, valued time. Len shared that his major professor "had a place in her home library . . . my own table. I think I went to her house nearly every Wednesday evening, and most every Saturday and Sunday over the last year and a half." Similarly, Anne, an elementary school principal, who is completing her doctoral studies, spoke to the time issue:

> Even with instant access to my major professor and cohort members through IM, we still met "outside of class time" at local restaurants for advancing our understanding of materials, research and next steps to take in the field studies. He really spends a great deal of time with us conversing over various issues, alternatives in approaching our research.

Francie, an assistant principal in a large urban high school shared, "Like in any group of leaders, each person has strengths and weaknesses. She took the time to identify those in each of us and then made sure they were highlighted in our class sessions or during our on-line meetings."

Valuing the student. Time spent with students indicated the faculty valued them and their research interest Len's perspective explains the interrelated connection between time, valuing students and their research. He said, "Finding someone who values your interests and appreciates what you want to research [is important]." It was a major contributor to Len's feeling valued. Len continued, "Until I joined forces with her, I really took courses that were convenient and filled a requirement." Rita shared "he [major professor] cared about me as a person." Likewise, Trish wrote about feeling valued as an individual and the "openness of the faculty" who freely gave feedback to her.

Participants expressed valuing in another way—they felt valued because their professors acknowledged their skills. For example, Francie, an assistant principal in a large urban school system, indicated that "time" and the "valuing" of the person has made the biggest impression on her thus far in her doctoral studies. She shared, "She made every person in our class feel worthy as a leader." Likewise, Trish, an Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, indicated the following:

> The faculty allows the cohorts to get to know them on both a personal and professional level. I think this is essential due to the design and nature of our learning experiences in this program. On the one hand we have knowledge that has to be acquired (leadership and organizational theories) yet, we are simultaneously involved in experiential learning in the sense that we are applying the knowledge and skills by participating in authentic research field studies led by the faculty.

Each participant identified trust and collaboration as important issues in doctoral programs. Anne spoke to a "true open system, faculty are open to and interact with students" that result in the creation of "a dynamic culture" where "needs" are met. Anne felt valued in her program because key faculty was able "to model, organize and support our learning, research, and inquiry."

Relationship between Major Professor and the Doctoral Student

Major Professors play a critical role in the lives of their doctoral students. Rita indicated that her major professor helped her to grow by the following:

- Being available to discuss my ideas.
- Agreeing to meet regularly to discuss my progress.
- Advocating on my behalf with other faculty/committee members.
- Supporting my endeavors.
- Reviewing my research and offering honest (constructive) feedback.

- Pushing me to make connections with the data.

- Taking an interest in me as a person, not just as a doctoral student.

She identified key values of her major professor—a sense of commitment, a sense of professionalism, and the purposeful act of modeling proactive behaviors and attitudes.

A sense of commitment. Our participants reported that they felt a strong sense of commitment from their major professors. This sense of commitment spanned several levels—person, program, and research. Anne indicated, "Faculty are really committed to this program—to us," and Len declared, "Are you kidding? Until her [major professor], I don't think most of the professors gave a care about students who were not theirs."

Trish also talked about her major professor as "mentoring along the way." She shared, "Wow—this is individualized instruction! What a rarity—I don't even see this in the IEPs written for special education students, or in K-12 practice." Anne also shared that her time with her major professor "made me more dimensional than the average doctoral student."

The participants reported that they were purposefully engaged in developing as people and scholars. Len expressed it this way:

> I remember how many times I wanted to call it quits. I would be tired and grumpy from long days at work, but my major professor kept lighting the fire under me, setting out small goals to attain, even on an evening-by-evening basis.

The participants shared that they felt empowered by the process of working with their major professors. They appreciated the purposeful advising—seeing streams of work patterns and how research "fits together."

The participants spoke of the iterative process of conducting field studies, writing, and receiving valuable feedback to repeat the process. Len shared, "All of the 'preliminary' writing that I did was incorporated into the dissertation at some point. I am still amazed at

how well my major professor anticipated various areas of focus from the very beginning."
He also shared that he "was able to become the 'expert' in my topic before I was aware of
the need to know the material."

Trish reported that her major professor and other key faculty were "approachable,
reliable, and willing to provide assistance." She continued that her major professor was
"authentically interested" and "modeled student-driven instruction." Trish also explained
that she "never felt in the dark" because her major professor was available whenever she
needed assistance. Trish concluded that working with her major professor allowed her "to
grow spiritually, professionally, personally, and emotionally." Participants also viewed their
major professor as working "by my side guiding" and offering "protection at key times"
during the process.

A sense of professionalism. Participants recognized the sense of professionalism
that was experienced from the start throughout their journeys to the doctorate. Anne
shared, "I never expected an e-mail from my major professor with the greeting 'Dear
Colleagues.' This phrase set the tone . . . from day one and continues today."
Professionalism was extended because of the purposeful efforts of faculty to build "a
reputable sense of community . . . and partnerships," explained Trish who also shared that
it was through this sense of community and partnership that "transformed my thinking."

Modeling. To write a quality dissertation can be a daunting task; however, for these
participants, the process was referred to as a process filled with key support from the very
beginning of their studies. Our participants each spoke about the emergent nature of their
work with their major professors. Anne Reeves shared:

[I] Learned how to act in the field, learned various protocols for conducting and
gathering data, learned various ways to critically analyze data including various
technology tools. I was also exposed to ways of identifying key themes, and saw how
the findings and implications flowed together.

Trish also wrote at length about the modeling that she witnessed. Related to commitment, she reported that she believed that faculty allowed "students to get to know them on both a personal and professional level."

Modeling how to be a better researcher, however, was transformative when considering the cumulative effect that the major professors had on doctoral students. Anne shared her insights on the transformative nature of the modeling of her major professor:

> I witnessed first hand that a positive focus generates more of the same. Dialogue structured around strengths versus weaknesses accesses a dynamic state that emboldens change. By recognizing and amplifying previous successes and positive experiences, a new image of the future becomes apparent.

Trish wrote of the impact her major professor had on her because of what he modeled throughout their interactions. Her words speak profoundly:

> While the process of learning was impressive, I was most enamored with the behavior of my major professor throughout each work session. He was focused, energetic, enthusiastic, and open to try new things in our study and dialogue. I felt valued, respected, and appreciated. Working with a person of such integrity on projects valuable to the field of education was exciting.

Our participants collectively indicated that their major professors brought out the best in them personally and professionally. They also stated that they learned many lessons along the way to completing their dissertation. Anne shared:

> My major professor brings out the best in me when his feedback was specific, timely, and constructive (both positive and critical). He modeled a strong work ethic and moral fortitude. Each encounter with him afforded additional knowledge and often

left me feeling awestruck. I felt more complex, yet transformed as a result of

newfound knowledge, a thought provoking conversation, and/or challenging

assignment. While I often felt pushed to the edge, a tremendous sense of

accomplishment was generated due to my major professor's high expectations. He

always leaves me with a goal and he expresses confidence in my ability to achieve

whatever is expected.

Anne said that her major professor "impacted my life the most" because he took "a

huge risk by opening himself up telling us what principles he lives by."

These major professors were characterized as being relentless, deep thinkers,

unafraid of public opinion, and taking the high road, and expecting others to do the same.

Len's summation of his major professor offers clarity, "She is an artist able to weave

wonderful illustrations with her words. She believes in you even when you find it difficult to

believe in yourself." Len was not alone in this sentiment in the power of belief. Anne shared,

"I never before believed in myself the way I do now."

We examined data from the responses shared in the LHRHCCM. The LHRHCCM is

often a source of undiscussable data. Although negative in nature, the undiscussable data

yielded insights on how much lack of "respect, de-valuing of the individual, and absence of

strong relationships" prevailed at certain periods of the journey toward the doctorate. It was

through the non-caring actions, words, and experiences that participants shared the need

for a higher level of care and regard. There were 108 examples shared by the five

participants that illustrated the vulnerability experienced in the absence of care and concern.

Our participants felt at times "lost" and "faceless." Len shared, "There were too

many of us and nobody seemed to care anyway." He also shared, "The department didn't

know I existed until Dr. Kent became my major professor." Similarly, Anne shared that

some "faculty don't know or care." She elaborated, "I really need to get this off my chest.

No one takes the time to advise students . . . to get to their desired goal." The

pervasiveness of the lack of care and concern for students was seen as a collective negative energy, and as one participant summarized, "I don't think most of the professors gave a care about students . . ."

Participants also spoke about the lack of honest exchanges, especially when it came to sharing information. "Information seemed protected, it wasn't shared with students who struggled to gain footing and develop a strategy for graduating and completing their programs," shared one participant. These feelings were often manifested in resentment because some faculty seemed to seldom provide "feedback," and that feedback was "sketchy [and] minimal at best."

The processes involved in the doctoral journey were filled with uncharted territory for our participants. They shared collectively that they wanted a process that was "more comfortable, clear, and organizationally sensitive" to the needs of the student instead of the "baptism by fire" that they experienced. Len wrote, "Nobody was home," and "I wasn't offered any assistance other than a form that indicated the need to take certain courses to fulfill requirements."

The data also indicated that participants collectively shared feelings of anger, a sense of rejection, and uncaring attitudes that were all too often met with experiences of "being ambushed," feeling the "wrath" and "lack of courtesy or care," and "defensive postures." All of these collective experiences are converse to, but support, the findings that it is through the care and concern for the students, the value placed on the student, and the deep and relentless belief in the student that quality and humane experiences made a difference in the lives of our participants and their abilities to bridge theory to praxis.

The Caring Relationship of the Faculty Extends to Linking Theory to Praxis in the Students' Work Context

A faculty member as professor or major professor relates to his or her students in myriad ways, often determined by the context that shapes the relationship between the

faculty member and the student. The relationship of theory (what is taught in the doctoral program) and praxis (what the student applies in his or her professional setting) is an important part of the relational process between the faculty member and student. The Gestalt of the doctoral education experience acts as an integration process for students to reach higher levels of student's profession and inducts the student in to the role of researcher (Golde, 2000). In essence, the doctoral student in many educational administration programs enters the doctoral program to acquire knowledge to be applied to the work setting.

The five participants in our study entered their doctoral programs with the pragmatic goal to acquire knowledge that would help each in their work setting. Data indicated three themes of how students discovered the relationship of theory to praxis. Embedded in each theme was the participant's recollection of a caring faculty where the faculty went to lengths to assist students in linking theory to praxis. Our three themes are (a) relationship of learning to the work context, (b) recognizing the potential effect of research on practice, and (c) guided practice—integration of knowledge to real-life situations.

Relationship of learning to the work context. Each of the five participants shared a common goal in their doctoral studies: they sought to identify how the knowledge they learned could be applied to the setting. For these participants, their participation in their doctoral program was a means to an end. Their goal was to be part of a transformative effort to facilitate learning and to improve instruction. Francie, who was just starting her studies stated:

 After only one course in supervision and I can see changes in many ways that I work with teachers. Communication is crucial and I anticipate my coursework will provide me with the tools necessary to engage in positive and effective communication.

Rita has similar aspirations after completing her studies, "I entered the field as a practitioner confident that I could make an impact and feel secure that I had been prepared for instructional leadership."

Trish who has been a full-time doctoral student for more than a year went beyond the connection of a course to praxis and appreciatively spoke of how faculty helped her transform her thinking about school leadership, change, and inquiry:

> When I consider the learning needs and changes needed in transforming today's educational system, the appreciative inquiry approach creates a powerful opportunity that can literally transform leaders by reframing their vision for students, for schools, for staff, reframing their beliefs toward education.

The students' sense of appreciation of what they learned was often seen in the way that faculty cared enough to make instruction exciting, stimulating, and connected to the praxis. Anne spoke passionately about an administration and organizational theory class and how she took what she learned to her work as a building principal:

> I remember a specific time when my cohort was lead by two faculty members in a discussion about Argyris's two theories-in-use: Model I single-loop learning and Model II double-loop learning. My major professor succeeded in helping me understand these concepts through questioning, visual diagrams, and guided discussion, requiring each of the cohort members to relate these concepts to specific situations in our work settings . . . I was enlightened by this perspective enough to engage my leadership group at my work site in an activity aligned with our class discussion.

Depending on the institution, the participants identified ways that they benefited from their program and were able to link what was learned to praxis. With the exception of Francie, who was just starting her program, the participants spoke of learning through

experience. In some cases it was through an internship. Rita stated:

> I worked as an intern principal in a large urban school district. This program provided administrative hopefuls an opportunity to gain firsthand practical experience by interning with seasoned principals. In addition, interns met weekly to take class through a large local university. This provided an opportunity to reflect, and gain support and understanding of the principalship.

In other cases, it was a research project that provided the doctoral student with insights gleaned through practice. Len said:

> I learned the value that research has on practice, as well as the chasm that often exists between the two. The research project that I participated in provided me with a great deal of insight into leadership practice and informed much of my experience both as a principal intern and as a principal.

Participants from the research intensive institution are involved in a program whose core experience focuses on full participation in a research field study team. Their intense research experience shaped their dissertation as well as their evolving work experience. Anne stated, "My field study meetings helped me to write my dissertation proposal and employ learned concepts at my work site. My major professor was focused, modeled various writing and data analysis techniques, and taught us specific ways to utilize technology."

The positive core of experiences related to us by these participants created a clear set of evidence that faculty commitment to helping students make the leap from theory to praxis exists in these institutions. It was also clear to us that the relevancy and application of knowledge is at the heart of what doctoral students consider crucial to their doctoral experiences. Len expressed this for all of our participants: "This experience helped me to merge the insights learned from my dissertation research coupled with my academic program with the practical realities of the job of school administrator."

Recognizing the Potential affect of Research on Practice

All doctoral programs have their culmination in research when the doctoral student defends his/her dissertation. The dissertation is central to affording the educational administration doctoral student with the necessary tools to understand the nature of research and to engage in creative and scholarly research interests related to his or her work context (Meleis, Wilson, & Chater, 1980). Our participants shared a number of positive ways that they were introduced into scholarly research. Trish explained:

> Within this emergent design structure, each of the field study research team members learned how to act in the field, protocols for conducting and gathering data, and ways to critically analyze data including the use of technology tools. I was also exposed to ways of identifying key themes, and saw how the findings and implications flowed together when each team member's work was merged to one final presentation.

Active engagement in the research process generated a sense of excitement for our participants. They were able to see the connection of theory to praxis or become involved in the practice of research and they were also able to view themselves as difference makers who were in the process of helping to transform an educational setting. Rita's enthusiasm for applying the research in her dissertation to a subject she felt deeply about is expressed this way:

> The most exciting moments of the doctoral program were during my final years when I was submerged in my field research. My dissertation study was a single case study of an African American female principal participating in an administrative preparation program. The program was a statewide program whose stakeholders included several school district personnel (both seasoned veterans and novice administrators) as well as university faculty. These stakeholders were brought to the table to guide

them toward success in the early stages of this challenging endeavor.

Rita's experience was mirrored by other participants. The "Aha" is not a predictable event; it occurs when the student is ready, provided that the conditions that support the fermenting of a learning environment are present. The fermenting of the learning environment requires a safe environment where students are willing to take risks and to change long-held beliefs (Schein, 1994). We found that our participants each experienced this environment, at different times and differing extents, in their university settings. In the smaller, research intensive university, the doctoral program is cohort based and accepts only six students a year into a new cohort. The size of the cohort and program helps to provide conditions that ferment learning. Trish stated:

> I had the opportunity to be completely immersed in the study through engagement in the field and data collection while remaining entrenched in my studies by making connections between prior learning and current experiences and engaging with fellow students in an academic arena.

We discovered that a highpoint of the academic experience for the participants was in the personal connections they made with what they learned and in the application of what they learned to an actual research experience. My major professor acted more as a mentor and facilitator and allowed me to learn to research through the doing process. In effect, my experience in research was often planned guided practice on the part my major professor.

Guided practice. Guided practice provided a way for these participants to integrate what they learned with practice. It also provided a means for our participants to create practical knowledge whose utility extended beyond themselves to their personal and professional colleagues (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). The integration of learning and practice to created a transformative experience for our participants. Anne stated:

I have acquired knowledge, competence, and confidence as a researcher by linking knowledge to practice through mentored field study experiences. The ultimate goal of an excellent program is to prepare us to become leaders who make original contributions to the field of educational leadership. This program is taking me exactly where I want to be with my leadership skills.

The creation of this transformative experience is not the sole domain of the faculty or of the institutionalized processes found in the programs. It is also in the heart of the student who finds him or herself ready for the experience. Rita shared her perspective:

The opportunity to engage in practice during the doctoral experience is one that must be actively sought out by interested students. As a practitioner who has decided to return to academia, I am enriched by the experiences that have shaped my professional growth and development. I believe that these experiences are invaluable and equip me to remain mindful of the marriage that must occur between research and practice in order for these interdependent entities to be successful.

The participants in our study identified a maturity that comes through experience and that is grounded in guided practice. In the experience of guided practice, the participant has the opportunity to question his/her beliefs, acquire new insights, and become the change he/she wants for others. Trish reflected on her change:

I realized that it would take a great deal of discipline, tenacity, initiative, and interest on my part. I went from a student solely interested in becoming a more informed practitioner to a graduate interested in the power of the impact of research. I learned the value that research has on practice, as well as the chasm that often exists between the two. The research project that I participated in provided me with a great deal of insight into leadership practice and informed much of my experience both as a principal intern and as a principal.

We found that when faculty cares enough to move from the intellectual pursuit of theory to integrate what is taught into the context of guided practice, the student sees the value in of learning. The student's learning extends the depth and richness of their doctoral experience.

Discussion and Conclusions

We believe that Noddings' (1995) notion of caring supports our findings. At the core of our findings is the notion of the caring relationships formed between a faculty member and a doctoral student. The doctoral students perceived the faculty member's caring relationship in many small acts of compassion. These small acts of compassion were often generative because they engendered renewed vigor and resilience within the doctoral student and strengthened the doctoral students' sense of self-efficacy (Dutton, Lilius, & Kanov, 2007). Moreover, Noddings' (1988) assertion that caring is inherent in the act of teaching illustrates the type of faculty mentors/advisors the doctoral students most respected. They recalled these faculty members as having a genuine concern for their cognitive and affective growth. In many ways, the doctoral student's growth was facilitated by the faculty member's willingness to be present and attentive to the doctoral student. Buber (1988) said, "The inmost growth of the self does not take place, as people like to suppose today through our relationship to ourselves, but through being made present by the other and knowing that we are made present by him" (p. 61). Ultimately, the faculty's sense of caring fostered the creation of caring and competent individuals (Noddings, 1995).

In this caring relationship, the faculty member helped to construct a culture of caring where the faculty member provided the doctoral student with a sense of hope and pathway to achieve his or her goal (successful defense of the dissertation) (Helland & Winston, 2005). In this caring relationship doctoral students responded by actively engaging in intellectual pursuits. In effect, in a recursive sense, they cared about learning because the faculty

member cared about them. Their active engagement in learning conveyed a belief in the faculty member's capability to raise them to a higher intellectual level.

The construction of a reality focused on a culture of caring may have occurred at a micro level, yet, it was important to the doctoral student. The social constructionist belief that we create our own reality is a foundation of AI and supports the idea that regardless of what is occurring in the doctoral student's context, the doctoral student can create a separate reality. In the relationship to the research presented here, the reality of a culture of caring was jointly created by the faculty member and doctoral student (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Gergen, 1996; Weick, 1995). Moreover, the faculty member's belief in the doctoral student's capabilities to be successful in this process served to motivate the doctoral student to stay the course. We believe that our appreciative inquiry into the educational administration doctoral students' perceptions of their doctoral programs bolstered Noddings (1995) belief that the primary task of the teacher is to care about facilitating the growth of a compassionate whole person, then cognitive growth follows as a natural result.

An appreciative inquiry into educational administration organizations may be a powerful research methodology for researchers in educational administration to understand their programs and perhaps more importantly, the students enrolled in these programs. The AI perspective of discovering the stories held by those within the focus of inquiry identifies undiscovered strengths and peak moments that may serve to stimulate generative growth for the program, the faculty, and students. Engaging in an AI approach may assist those concerned with change and/or reform of educational administration programs to reduce defensiveness and facilitate the co-construction of educational administration programs based on program strengths. Doctoral students of educational administration benefit from a culture of caring; they will benefit in applying the culture of caring to their work context.

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