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What's Up Doc? An Examination of the Lived Experiences Affecting ABD in the Ed.D. Student

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Lynn University

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WHAT'S UP DOC? AN EXAMINATION OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES AFFECTING

ABD IN THE ED.D STUDENT

by

Kimberly A. Carlo, Ed.D

A DISSERTATION

submitted to Lynn University in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

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Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership

Ross College of Education

Lynn University

APPROVAL OF DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE PROPOSAL

Student Name   Student ID No.

Title of *Dissertation in Practice*:

The *Dissertation in Practice* proposal has been read and approved,
as indicated by the signatures of the committee members below,
on the following date:

The individuals listed below have approved this *Dissertation in Practice* proposal. The
student may proceed with the conduct of the *Dissertation in Practice* research.

Committee Chair:

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Committee Member:

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External Committee Member:

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Dr. Kathleen Weigel, Dean/Ed.D. Director   *Date*

ABSTRACT

KIMBERLY CARLO:What's Up Doc? An Examination into the Lived Experiences Affecting ABD in the Ed.D. Student

Doctorate students have unique challenges and needs. Many must complete their dissertations and become stuck in the all-but dissertation (ABD) phase. The design of a doctoral program can leave out the emotional aspect of these students. This study sought to understand the needs of doctorate students and focus on challenges that inhibit them from reaching their goals. It analyzed goal commitments, personal priorities, and their significance to dissertation completion. This study analyzed doctoral students' motivation, stressors, goals, and how goal-setting can work toward completing a dissertation. The results identified indicators of ABD in Ed.D. students while completing their dissertation. Several themes emerged which can allow for future effective support of Ed.D. students.

Order Number: _____

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This doctorate would only have become a reality with a few incredibly understanding and supportive people. Thank you to the dissertation committee for keeping me on track and knowing what I was missing. Dr. Weigel has made a profound impact on my life. While in class, she asked us to discuss a favorite teacher. This was a challenging task for me. When it was my turn, I was honest and told the group I struggled to name a teacher who could fit the description. Dr. Weigel is now that person. She inspires me to always do better, try harder, and to continue to "feed the beast."

Thank you, Cohort 20! Through such an incredible journey, you have truly made this unforgettable. I know that we will continue to share our journeys together.

Thank you to the focus group participants who were willing to share their stories. This dissertation would not have been possible without your openness and grace. I am truly grateful for your consent and desire to share your stories.

Thank you to my children, Gabbie and Dominic. Your ability to understand when I needed a snack, pretzels, coffee, or ice water helped me more than you know. Every time you checked on me while writing this dissertation, showed me that I couldn't ever give up. I hope that

you look back on this journey and remember that you can do anything in life. You both mean more to me than I can ever say here. Never stop learning.

Thank you to Eric, my husband of 25 years. Eric, you pushed me to think differently and go into education when unsure. While pursuing my master's degree and now this dissertation, your never-ending dedication to me has been genuinely selfless.

And finally, to my two dads, Michael and Richie. Some people do not have the incredible gift of having a father. I am blessed with two dads. Thank you both for your love and for always cheering me on when I was not strong. I appreciate all the times you brought me hope or chatted about my crazy ideas. I am forever grateful and proud to call you both my dad.

DEDICATION

My grandmother was one of a kind. Lucyna "Lucy" Czyzewski was stubborn, dedicated, and loved like no other. She lived through World War II and other life-changing struggles while losing her children. Lucy came to America not knowing what would happen next. She dedicated her life to helping other immigrants to find a better life in the United States.

After working a long day as a seamstress, my grandmother would make dinner for my mom, grandfather, and me. She never complained about watching me on weekends. She listened to my stories, and while she didn't always say much, I could tell she loved hearing me.

Lucy was generous, savvy, and caring. She would have been here in the front row smiling proudly at me had she lived through COVID. I can only hope she can feel my admiration for her as she made me the tenacious person I have become. This dissertation is dedicated to the fantastic person I was privileged to know. There will never be another human like her, and I miss her every day.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2016) report that as many as 55% of doctoral students in the United States who start their doctoral studies do not ever complete their doctoral programs. The purpose of this study was to learn which factors interrupt the dissertation process at one educational doctorate granting institution of higher education. This research provided insight into the challenges doctoral students experience while working through a Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) and other Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) programs and provide insight to the institution for improvement of the Ed.D. Program. There are over 130 schools that use this CPED scholarly practice model with their Ed.D. students. The CPED framework works with three guiding principles to create Ed.D. programs. These include; reframing the definition of the Ed.D., and offering guiding facets to the design and building blocks of the program. More discussion on this will be provided in chapter two.

The average length of time in a CPED Ed.D. program is four and a quarter years (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate [CPED], n.d.). Universities using the CPED model report that fifty-three percent graduated within three years (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate [CPED], n.d.). A study of Ed. D. programs by McBrayer, Melton, Calhoun, Dunbar,& Tolman (2018) emphasized that the critical nature of the time to completion of students in doctoral programs is an ongoing concern. "Doctoral attrition is a decades-old and multifaceted problem affecting institutions and students worldwide" (Ames, Berman & Casteel, 2018, p. 84). Universities, governments, and communities can be deprived of an educated society according to D'Andrea (2013). There are decades of research with graduate attrition rates for students (Tinto,

1975; Carter-Veale, Holder & Joseph, 2019; Bean, 1980) which will be reviewed in chapter two. This long pondered concern for students enrolled in CPED Ed.D. programs are not as researched. This study sought to identify why doctoral students finish classes but not their dissertation.

For this case study, the researcher has chosen to focus on doctorate students working towards their Ed.D. and not their Ph.D. The researcher's personal experience in the Ed.D. Program shaped this decision. The emerging distinction between the two programs surfaced almost one hundred years ago (Perry, 2013). In 1893, Teacher's College offered the first Ph.D. program in education (Perry, 2013). Harvard also offered a similar program but struggled with its identity (Powell, 1980). These schools needed help with separation between the sciences and establishing education's own identity. Specifically, Harvard sought to "symbolize education's prestige and autonomy" (Powell, 1980, p. 137). A key distinction for the identity formation of the Ed. D. is what the student would like to do with their studies. Educators who seek to become professional practitioners and work on a problem of practice can work on their Ed.D. Researchers and those who want to teach in colleges and universities can pursue a Ph.D.

Earning a doctorate can be an overwhelming, exciting, and joyous time for an individual (McBrayer, et al 2021). Kelley and Salisbury-Gelnon (2016) presented students who complete the coursework, but do not complete the dissertation, resulting in an all-but dissertation (ABD). The dedication and grit needed to persevere are immense (Blanchard, 2018).

How important is persistence to a doctoral student? Tinto's (1998) theory posits that "the more academically and socially involved individuals are – that is, the more they interact with other students and faculty— the more likely they are to persist" (p. 168).

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that 145,781 and 11,829 students respectively earned Master's and Ph.D. degrees in education from an accredited

institution in the United States from 2015 to 2016 (NCES, 2017). For this study, the researcher solicited data from 275 doctoral students. At this CPED founding member university, the graduation rate was 55%. What about those who are not completing their doctorate degrees? Why are so many completing coursework but unable to finish their dissertation in practice?

The CPED Ed.D. granting university examined for this case study is a founding member of the CPED Consortium and has an annual enrollment of two cohorts consisting of an average of 12 students per cohort. The blended model is the mode of instructional delivery. Students meet one week per month, and two months in a row per course. Fifty-three credits are amassed over a course of two and a half years with students being expected to work on their "problem of practice" while completing course work. The Ed.D. Students have three courses in a row that assist with completing a rough draft of their Chapter I (The Problem), Chapter II (Literature Review), and Chapter III (The Method). Students take the course in the order of The Problem, then The Method, and then The Literature Review. After the Problem course or during The Methods course students are paired with a dissertation chair that has some background in the student's problems of practice/topic. At this CPED granting institution, an average of 24-26 students begin the Ed.D. program, and 45%, on average, have stopped or dropped out of the Ed.D. Program before the end of three years. Addressing the pause in completing this program may assist in addressing the concerns of dropouts in the CPED program and possibly give understanding to other CPED programs as well (Tinto, 2012).

Significance of the Study

People who enroll in doctoral programs go from general knowledge to expert level (Bagaka et al., 2015). Educated experts are needed in schools and communities (Golde, 2013). A tremendous amount of time, resources, and effort are put into doctoral students by the faculty to

assist them to succeed as doctors (Bagaka et al., 2015). Students and universities play a part in the students' success (Bagaka et a;., 2015). Knowing why these individuals are not finishing doctorate programs specifically at this CPED founding member institution may assist with practical support to keep doctoral students going and increase graduation rates.

Rationale

The researcher's personal experience through her Ed.D. program motivated her to explore this topic. Cohort members would disappear and struggle with staying in the doctoral classes. If doctoral students share their struggles while in their doctoral programs, could assists be put into scaffolded supports to help?

Existing research may provide insights into internal challenges for doctoral students. These include motivation and academic ability (Evans et al., 2018). External challenges can also place additional hurdles in the lives of these students. Students who are trying to balance working full-time, parenting, and job-related stressors have been demonstrated as crucial challenges (Cornér, Löfström, & Pyhältö, 2017).

Purpose of the Study

This study seeks to answer the question, What are the lived experiences of Ed.D. doctoral students at this founding CPED institution of higher education who struggle to finish their dissertations and remain "all but dissertation" ABD? Deciding to commit to a terminal degree involves tremendous dedication. Potential doctorate students consider programs, prepare presentations, gather transcripts, and continue to work full-time jobs (Brill et al., 2014). Being admitted is a highly competitive process (D'Andrea, 2013). Through a review of literature and interview data from Ed.D. students, data on why individuals are not completing their degrees was explored. The guiding idea of "Existing research on doctoral students has consistently found

mental and physical health concerns and high attrition rates among these students, but a comprehensive understanding of these students' experiences is still lacking" guided this study through the research question (Sverdlik et al., 2018).

Research Question

This study will be guided by the following research question:

- What are the lived experiences of Ed.D. doctoral students who struggle to finish their dissertation and remain " all but dissertation" ABD at one CPED founding member institution?

Research Design

This case study seeks to collect data from doctoral students in a CPED founding member university in the southeast United States. The targeted population will meet in focus groups. Participants include doctoral students who completed the dissertation, students currently in the doctoral program, students who completed their doctorate within three years, and those who still need to complete their dissertations. The methodology will be explained more in Chapter 3.

Assumptions

The researcher wanted to identify why highly educated people were struggling to finish their doctorate programs. Specifically, knowing more about why educational leaders who value and stress the importance of staying in school were not completing their dissertations. The researcher, who is a trained school counselor, personally became involved with several cohort members who were thinking about quitting the Ed.D. program. In doing so, this dissertation became the desire to identify what could help future doctoral students to earn their Ed.D. within three months of finishing their coursework. The researcher hopes to increase graduation rates and

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a feeling of connectivity with the university and fellow doctorate students. This connectivity will be discussed more in Tinto's research with dropout causes (Tinto, 1975).

Theoretical Framework

Tinto's model of dropout behavior looked at economics, academic load, and the social process of stopping one's education (Tinto, 1975). These factors will be extrapolated from the researcher's focus group data. Emphasizing commitments, Tinto's model uses prior experiences with learning and a person's ability to stay committed as essential parts of enduring and graduating. Other attrition models are Beeler (1991) and Bean (2005). More on these models will be discussed in the next chapter.

Tinto (1975) describes how the influence of the higher education institution can positively affect students and rates of attrition. Specifically, Tinto (1975) discussed that the professor is the most influential in graduation rates. From these early models, early intervention methods were developed to reduce attrition.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following frequently utilized terms are defined.

Action Research: focuses on an existing problem (usually in a helping profession), with the goal of improving current practices and desired outcomes (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019)

Applied Research: research that has immediate relevance to current procedures or policies and can inform decision making about practical problems (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019)

All but dissertation (ABD): refers to a student completing all coursework in the doctoral program but not the dissertation requirements (Ehrenberg, Zuckerman, Groen & Brucker, 2009).

Attrition: the measure of the proportion of students leaving the higher education system (Bair & Wayworth, 2014)

Blended delivery of instruction: an effective mix of traditional face to face learning with online delivery (Rao, 2019)

Case Study: Qualitative research design in which a single individual, program, or event is studied in depth for a defined period of time (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019)

CPED: Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate includes over 130 colleges and schools of education, which have committed resources to work together to undertake a critical examination of the doctorate in education (EdD) through dialog, experimentation, critical feedback, and evaluation. (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate [CPED], n.d.)

Cohort Model: Using a group of students who enrolled in a program during a specific semester as an intact community of learners (Perry, 2016)

Degree completion: completing the requirements of an Ed.D. program (including dissertation) within four months after course work is finished (Wolast et al., 2018)

Dissertation: is a formal writing requirement often an original contribution to knowledge and research – for a doctoral degree (Glossary of United States Educational Terminology, 2018).

Dissertation in Practice (DiP): a scholarly endeavor that impacts a complex problem of practice (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate [CPED], n.d.)

Dropout: a student who leaves an educational institution before completing their program or degree (Tinto, 1982)

Ed.D.: 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 (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate [CPED], n.d.)

Focus Group: Small group of people who are assembled and asked to express their perspectives about a particular issue (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019)

Persistence: Persistence is defined as "the continuance of a student's progress toward the completion of a doctoral degree" (Bair, 1999)

Problem of Practice: a persistent, contextualized, and specific issue embedded in the work of a professional practitioner, the addressing of which has the potential to result in improved understanding, experience, and outcomes (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate [CPED], n.d.)

Qualitative Research: yields information that cannot be easily reduced to numbers; typically involves an in-depth examination of a complex phenomenon (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019)

Retention: continuous enrollment in an Ed. D. program (Brill, 2014)

Time to degree (TTD): time measured from beginning the first class in an Ed.D. program and completing the requirements of the dissertation (McBrayer, 2018)

Traditional Dissertation: a five-chapter document to address adding new research or exploration of a problem of practice (Perry, 2016)

Organization of Dissertation

This dissertation was organized into five sections that examine why having and keeping educated members of society is critical for humans. Chapter I introduced the purpose of the study and the problem statement's background. The next chapter continued to provide the foundation and study's direction. Chapter III addressed the qualitative design and identified research questions. Chapter IV details how the survey and focus group data formed the researcher's conclusions. Finally, Chapter V presents the results and how this may impact future research and practice.

Summary

Chapter one discussed the importance of learning why doctorate-level students need to be completing their programs. Studying this struggle is significant because highly educated society members are greatly valued. Doctoral students in education have various intrinsic and extrinsic challenges. Identifying these difficulties may assist in aiding these individuals in earning their doctorates.

Chapter II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The importance of examining attrition rates in doctoral students was summarized in chapter one. To further the discussion of why doctoral students are not completing their dissertations, chapter two introduces a review of dissertations, books, and journal articles on this topic.

A Ph.D. and an EdD are both doctoral degrees, but they differ.

Ph.D. programs focus on original research and creating new knowledge in a particular field. Students in a Ph.D. program typically conduct research and write a dissertation contributing to the field's knowledge. Ph.D. programs are often offered in various disciplines, including science, engineering, social sciences, humanities, and business.

On the other hand, an EdD focuses on professional practice and applying existing research to improve educational practices. EdD programs often emphasize leadership, policy, and administration in educational institutions. They are often designed for students who want to work in education-related fields outside academia, such as school administration, policy-making, and educational consulting.

In summary, while Ph.D. and EdD are doctoral degrees, the focus and approach of the programs differ. Ph.D. programs emphasize original research, while EdD programs emphasize applying existing research to improve professional practice in education.

Addressing the dropout concerns

As far back as 1975, Tinto looked at retention in education (Tinto, 1975). Tinto sought to separate factors such as academic failure and voluntary withdrawal. By developing a model of dropout behavior, Tinto looked at economics, academic load, and the social process of stopping one's education (Tinto, 1975).

It is important to note that the reasons for dropping out can be complex and multifaceted, and it is often a combination of factors that lead a student to leave their program. Economics is a concern for many students. While an advanced degree can assist someone in making more money, the financial burden of enrolling as a doctoral student complicates this. It can be challenging to balance one's work, social, and family responsibilities while meeting the demands of doctoral-level courses. Doctoral-level programs can be intense and challenging; some students may lose motivation over time. This could be due to needing more engagement with the subject matter, difficulty finding a research topic or feeling isolated from peers.

Additionally, the responsibility of writing research papers, finding reliable sources, and finding the time to research can be onerous for a doctoral student. Doctoral-level programs are highly demanding, and some students may need help with the academic workload. Factors to consider could be inadequate preparation, insufficient academic support, or difficulty adjusting to the demands of graduate-level work.

Tinto (1975) emphasizes the importance of social integration, or the degree to which a student feels connected to the college or university community, as a critical determinant of persistence. Overall, Tinto's Dropout model offers an understanding of why some students drop out of college and how institutions can work to promote student success and persistence.

Figure 1 *TINTO MODEL Schema for Dropout from College*

Commitments   Academic System   Commitments

Family Background

Individual Attributes

Pre-College Schooling

Goal Commitment

Institutional Commitment

Grade Performance

Intellectual Development

Peer-Group Interactions

Faculty Interactions

Academic Integration

Social Integration

Goal Commitment

Institutional Commitment

Dropout Decisions

Social System
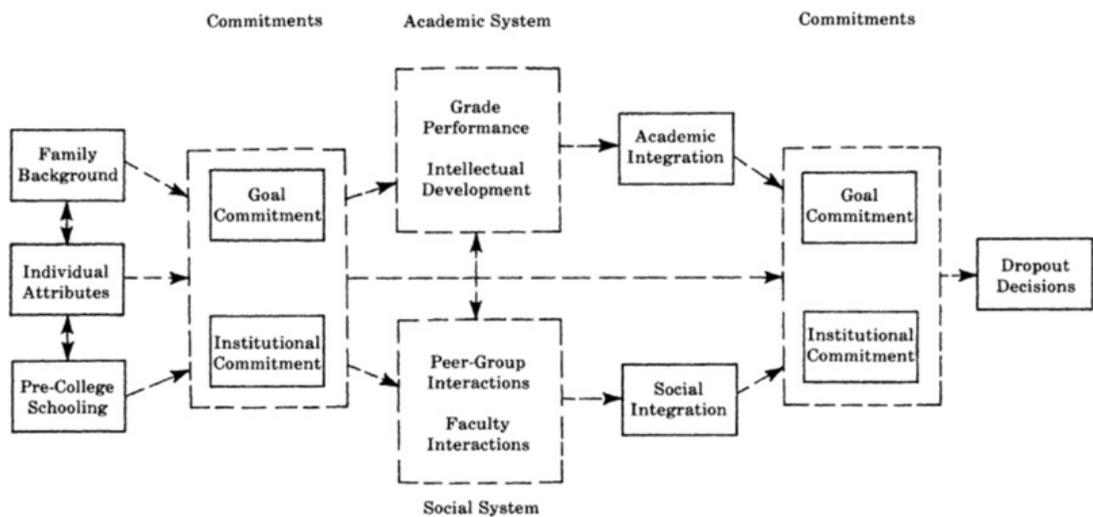
Tinto's model emphasizes commitments. There is much that is expected from a doctoral student. Family background, prior experiences in school, and personal qualities can significantly affect the ability to persevere and complete a doctoral program. Tinto's model emphasizes the longitudinal process during the decision to stop learning. The individual's experience with the institution of learning is also a critical part of Tinto's model. According to Tinto, "the lower the individual's commitment to the goal of college completion, the more likely he is to drop out from college" (Tinto, 1975).

Castelló et al.revealed that one-third of a sample of doctoral students who were still enrolled had intended to drop out at some point (Castelló et al., 2017). Common motivations in at-risk doctoral students include a lack of socialization and work and personal life struggles (Ali & Kohun, 2016).

Who are doctoral students?

Scholars make the decision to seek a terminal degree. Many seek personal fulfillment, higher pay, and increased professional opportunities (Templeton, 2016). Motivation to teach and

contribute to research can also influence earning a doctorate in education (Zhou, 2015). No matter what drives an individual to pursue a doctorate, knowing more about the negative influences can assist in helping to support them.

Figure 2 *NUMBER OF DOCTORAL DEGREES EARNED IN THE UNITED STATES IN 2019/20 BY FIELD OF RESEARCH*

Figure 2 shows the numbers of earned doctoral degrees in 2019 and 2020 by research field. The most popular degree earned is in health professions, followed by legal studies. Educational doctorates were the third most earned degree.

Number of doctoral degrees earned in the United States in 2019/20, by field of research
Doctoral degrees earned in the United States 2019/20, by field of research
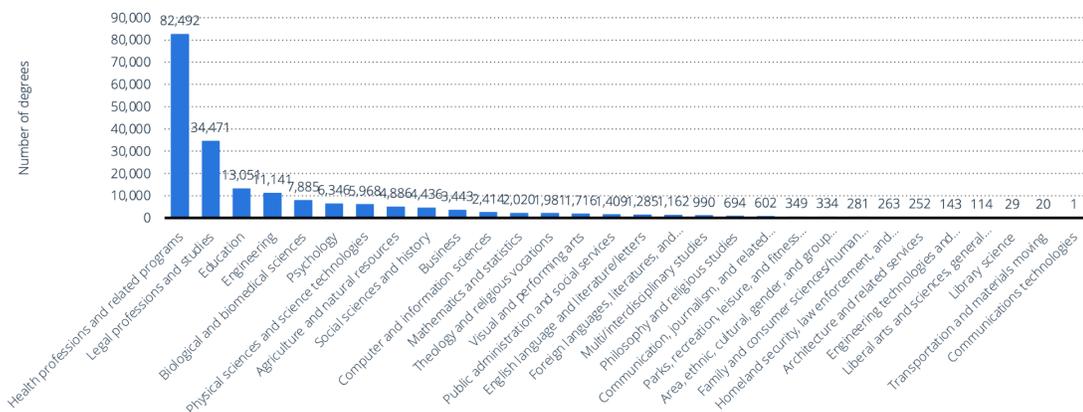
In 2020, doctoral students needed seven and a half years after starting graduate school to complete their doctorate. On average, they needed 8.7 years after their Bachelor's degree to complete their doctoral studies (NCSES, 2021).

Educational practitioners struggle with wanting to advance their careers, balancing their time, and finding a program that addresses real concerns (Perry, 2016). The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) was created in 2007 to address this struggle. The Ed.D. program was reformed through the CPED design by applying practical skills in an educational

setting. Educational leaders can transform their practice through real-life application of their work in this type of learning (Golde, 2013).

The emotional aspect of doctoral students can often be overlooked in the design of the doctoral program (Bess, 1978). Examining program efficacy and design is not a new idea. Keeping doctoral students in a program and feeling supported dramatically benefits the student and the university.

The Early Models of DropOut

Beeler's model in 1991 proposed that doctoral in education (Ed.D.) students work full-time and need active academic support. In-person and electronic writing advisors. Ideas to log in during lunch and chat to get help are needed (Beeler, 1991). Because Ed.D. students work full-time, they need active and differentiated academic support. Beeler's work supported students with a log-in during their lunch break to chat and get help. He also had in-person and electronic writing advisors.

The nature of dropping out of higher education remains complicated (Tinto, 1975). Several pieces for deciding to stop learning have been identified for years (Bean, 2005). Academic failure, work-related stress, starting a family, and social isolation in the doctoral program have all been identified as possible factors in dropping out (Hanson, Loose, & Reveles, 2020). No single factor causes attrition in doctoral programs; instead, many factors (e.g., Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016) could play a part. Two recurring factors are (1) social connectedness, including that with peers in the program and that with the faculty member who serves as an advisor, facilitator, instructor, or committee chair, and (2) usefulness of the curriculum and instruction within which the culminating project emerges.

Beeler, Tino, and Bean all addressed the concerns of dropout prevention. Many factors contribute to the challenges that doctoral students face. The common link these early researchers share is the identification of internal and external challenge

Discovering and analyzing the hidden reasons for student attrition have resulted in several models. Bean's (1980) attrition model differs from Tinto's (1975) as it considers the most predictive important factor to drop out to be students' intentions. Figure 3 shows the different variables Bean (1980) uses in student attrition.

Figure 3. *BEAN'S CAUSAL MODEL OF STUDENT ATTRITION*
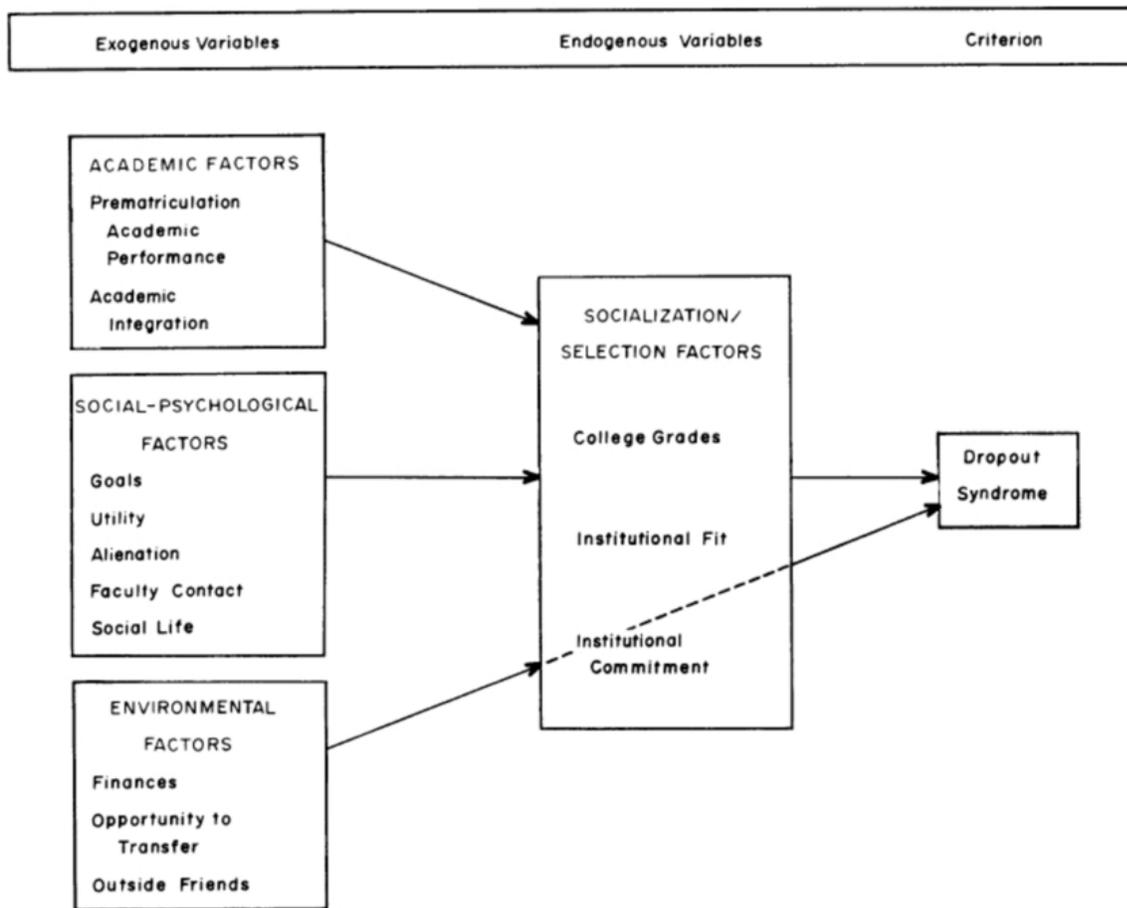
Recent Research in Doctoral Dropout Prevention

Well-planned research questions and a committed plan with a faculty advisor help a doctoral student to stay on track (Davis, 2019). Socioemotional factors such as connection to one's cohort and feelings of comfortability have been identified as helpful to finishing a doctoral program (Simpson, 2013).

"Doctoral attrition is a decades-old and multifaceted problem, affecting institutions and students world wide" (Ames, Berman & Casteel, 2018, p. 84). Having highly educated individuals benefits society, supports academic fields, and increases research efficacy (Bagaka et al., 2015). Doctoral students who do not complete their dissertations are not contributing to their field. This can significantly diminish their career goals and ability to advance (Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016).

Another study by Lake et al. (2018) showed the importance of supporting doc students' personal motivation, and supportive faculty, with a cohort model to support doctoral students. Considering students' expectations, feelings of isolation, and prior school experience were essential when supporting time-to-degree completion (Lake, Koper, Balayan, & Lynch, 2018). Finding studies that examine high attrition rates in Ed.D. programs can be scarce. Prioritizing the needs of doctoral students could better support future education leaders (Zambo, Zambo, Buss, Perry, & Williams, 2014).

Key pieces of doctoral success

Persistence is defined as "the continuance of a student's progress toward the completion of a doctoral degree" (Bair, 1999, p. 8). This doctoral persistence is proven to be essential to earning a degree in a doctoral program (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012).

Mental health is a critical piece of being successful in a doctoral program. Studies have shown that graduate students have the highest reported anxiety than the general population

(Cooke, 2020). The mental health of doctoral students can be challenging under the pressure of such a large undertaking. Depression and anxiety were the most common concerns (Evans et al., 2018; Barry, Woods, Warnecke, Stirling, & Martin, 2018). Balancing the course workload, family, job-related stress, and financial concerns can be arduous for doctoral students (Cornér, Löfström, & Pyhältö, 2017). These concerns can significantly affect the ability of the doctoral student to continue in the program (Hunter & Devine, 2016).

Adult learning theories allow for an understanding of more effective ways to motivate and support (Knowles, 1980). Adults pursuing a doctoral degree are a dynamic age group with many responsibilities like career, family, and responsibilities are key concepts.

What motivates someone to pursue a doctorate? "Factors that affected pursuing a doctoral degree included professional development, encouragement from superiors, a need to be a part of the learning process, career advancement, the ability to pursue additional building-level positions, life goals, cerebral depth, the terminal title, and developing a skill set that distinguishes one's self from others" (Burton, 2020).

There are many different ways to earn a doctorate. Programs exist in online, in-person, and hybrid formats. As many programs exist, so does support for the doctorate student. E-mentoring has also been explored for online doctorate students (Black, 2017).
Different supports are warranted because of the different types of doctoral students, their life situations, and the type of programs that exist. Students need support in addition to a chairperson. Workshops with professors, interchanges with cohort members, and collaborative projects can be compelling (Nerad & Miller, 1997).

Preventing doctoral attrition is a critical issue for universities and society. The 2005 study by Golde (2005) showed that losing potential doctorates significantly costs the university

community and their funding. The findings of this study could guide how to best support doctoral students, so they finish their dissertations and contribute to best practices.

The CPED Difference

The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) focuses on developing and supporting rigorous Ed.D. programs. An alternative to a traditional dissertation is supported through a dissertation-in-practice CPED model Schulman (2015).

The Carnegie project of the Education Doctorate (CPED) members believe that the professional doctorate in education prepares Educators to apply appropriate scientific practices, generate new knowledge, and stewardship of the education profession. The CPED Consortium includes over 125 Colleges and Schools of Education across the United States, Canada, and Ireland. They have been described as agents of change in the education world (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate [CPED], n.d.).

History of the Doctorate in Education

At the turn of the 20th century, qualified education individuals sought to be acknowledged as separate from colleges of Arts and Sciences; these scholars sought validation by linking with the university and receiving training (Clifford & Guthrie, 1988). Throughout the 1920s, many Harvard students and faculty needed clarification about the nature of the ED.D., which seemed similar to the Ph.D. The existence of rhetorical claims showed that the education doctorate purposes were professional rather than scholarly (Powell, 1980, p. 154). The Graduate School of Education never explained that the Ph.D. served research intentions while the ED.D. served professional intentions (Powell, 1980). Instead, it defined the ED.D. as "created the appearance of a functional difference between the ED.D. and the PhD., when in fact no such difference existed" (Powell, 1980, p, 154). The Teachers College ED.D. program incorporated

courses in educational administration, guidance, and curriculum and instruction (Cremin, 1978, p, 16). The final project reports were to cover topics beyond those of the Ph.D. dissertation and often included investigations of curriculum development and administrative and institutional reform issues. The central problem in distinguishing the two doctoral degrees, however, was essentially the distinction between "hi prestige of research degrees when compared to professional practice degrees' (Clifford & Guthrie, 1988, p. 150), which influenced the enrollment of practitioners into research degree programs. The Doctorate of Education was expected to" organize existing knowledge instead of discovering new truths" (Freeman, 1931, p. 151).

Defining the EdD

The CPED framework supports the creation of a quality, rigorous professional practice doctorate in education while honoring the local context of each school or college of education (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate [CPED], n.d.). With each part building on the last, EDD programs can reimagine how they prepare students to excel as leaders in the field of Education. To build an ED.D. program upon these program principles, CPED members have defined a set of design concepts, which include; scholarly practitioners, problem of practice, inquiry as practice, laboratories of practice, signature pedagogy, the dissertation in practice, and mentoring and advising (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate [CPED], n.d.).

Additionally, the guiding principles for the CPED program design are framed around; questions of equity ethics and social justice to bring about solutions to complex problems of practice. They also seek to prepare leaders who can apply this new knowledge to make a difference in the organizations where they live and work. This program design allows CPED members to develop and demonstrate collaboration and communication skills to effectively work

with diverse communities and build upon partnerships. Field-based opportunities which analyze problems of practice and use multiple frames to develop meaningful solutions are also a goal of the CPED program. The CPED framework develops a professional knowledge base that integrates practical and research knowledge, linking theory with a systemic inquiry. CPED programs seek to bring out transformational problems and use professional knowledge in practice. Doctorate students in CPED programs look at problems of practice where they are the insiders and use their roles to influence change (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate [CPED], n.d).

Summary

A review of historical data on doctoral student attrition was presented. Commonalities of key researchers included internal and external challenges which doctoral students face. A discussion of the key differences between Ph.D. and Ed. D. students showed similarities and differences. The CPED program seeks to define the educational leader. Through its member institutions and partnerships, the CPED provides a platform for collaboration, sharing best practices, and ongoing improvement of doctoral education programs.

This study could contribute to the current information on best practices for advising and supporting doctoral students. Supporting doctoral students also helps to cultivate the next generation of leaders in academia, industry, and other fields. The responsibility of universities and doctoral students is a collaborative effort to ensure the future of educational leaders.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Everyday humans ask questions. A retail associate may ask, "What colors would entice customers to come into the store?" An equestrian may ask, "Will my horse spook in the far corner again?" So many different people wonder and ask questions every day. We ask questions and consider possibilities. Does this mean that all humans are researchers?

Research is about asking questions like our everyday queries. When seeking to understand more about a topic, these thoughts are similar to researchers. Case studies involve using interviews, surveys, and interviews for an in-depth look at a question (Schoch, 2020).

This case study sought to uncover the shared experiences of the Ed.D. students from a founding CPED institution of higher education.

Research Question

The answer to this guiding question may discover how doctoral students can be effectively supported to complete their dissertations. Data will be solicited through focus groups.

- What are the lived experiences of doctoral students who struggle to finish their dissertations and remain "all but dissertation" ABD at one CPED founding member institution?

Context/Setting of the Study

The researcher sought permission from the institution's IRB to access students' email addresses. Surveys to gain informed consent were emailed to students. Email addresses were secured from the College of Education office. There were four sets of focus groups where data was collected. All focus groups were populated with students currently in the university's CPED

Ed.D. program, students who have completed their dissertations, students who took more than three years to complete their doctorates, and those who still need to finish.

Most respondents were expected to be between the ages of 22 and 78. The expected job roles of surveyed individuals were teachers, administrators, Human Resources, and people employed in higher education (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate [CPED], n.d.).

Participation was voluntary. The survey invitation provided an overview of the study, a link to participate, and researchers' contact information for any questions.

Description of Population and/or Sample

Students in the university CPED Ed.D. program were asked to participate in this research. These students attend or have attended classes in this founding CPED institution member. Focus groups included: students who have finished their dissertations, students who are currently in the program, and those who have not finished their dissertations were solicited for participation. Expected responses would be mostly female aspiring leaders who are 86% full time enrolled CPED students. The delivery model of the Ed.D. program is 64.4% cohort model. Additionally, three types of program delivery modes are found among CPED member institutions: (a) face-to-face (40%); (b) hybrid (40%); and online (20%) (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate [CPED], n.d.) The forced field survey is included in Appendix C.

Research Design - Rationale for Design

This study employed a case study design. Creswell & Creswell (2014) described the importance of using a case study design to uncover, make meaning, and get the essence of a shared experience. Focus groups were implemented to discover this knowledge. This qualitative case study utilized focus groups to target themes among Ed.D. students in this CPED founding

university in the southeast United States. Each focus group sought to understand the lived experiences of Ed.D. CPED students that are current and previous students.

Procedures

Once IRB approval was granted (Appendix G), the researcher contacted the office of the research analyst of the college of education (Appendix A) at the CPED Ed.D. founding institution of higher education to request the listserv of all Ed.D. students at the institution - past and present. When the Listserv was received by the researcher, the researcher emailed (Appendix B) all Ed.D. students/ doctors on the list. In this email (Appendix B) there was a link to the informed consent (Appendix C) should the students agree to participate in the focus groups. Once the students agreed to participate they were taken to a brief survey (Appendix D) to select which focus group day and time they preferred to attend. These students are current students, graduated CPED Ed.D. students, and those who have finished courses but not successfully presented their final defense. Participation in these focus groups was voluntary. The survey invitation provided an overview of the study, a link to anticipate, and researchers contact information for any questions or concerns.

Potential participants were given a choice of days and times for their focus group participation. Focus groups were via ZOOM, and the link was sent to each participant to join on their selected date and time. Once in the focus group, the researcher recorded the meeting on two devices and read a script (Appendix E) to the participants asking if they had any questions and thanked them for their participation. Next, the researcher asked the semi-structured focus group questions (Appendix F). The data collection will be presented next.

Data Collection

Focus group data was recorded on two devices, one being the computer through ZOOM and the other, a personal recording device used as a backup in case the ZOOM malfunctions. The researcher initiated interviews through focus groups which were not over one hour. This qualitative interview style extrapolated specific data for this study. The researcher's experience as a licensed school counselor may have allowed for open dialog and facilitated comfort as the group shared their experiences. Creswell (2013) reported that focus groups are most effective when they are feeling comfortable and heard. This researcher was interested in the doctoral students' feedback on dissertation challenges, life experiences, and personal/ social factors such as sacrifices. The researcher's interview was continually guided by the question, "What are the lived experiences of doctoral students who struggle to finish their dissertations and remain all but dissertation ABD"?

Instrumentation

The researchers focus groups began by the questions provided in Appendix F. These open ended questions relating to their lived experiences were recorded and used to address the researcher's research question.

Data Analysis

Focus group data was transcribed for the researcher by use of the microphone on her MacBook. This automatic speech-to-text allowed the researcher to open a Google Doc which was transcribed as the focus group was speaking. There was an automatic cutoff after 30 seconds if there was no detectable speech. As participants spoke, the audio was transcribed for review on an open Google Doc. The researcher organized the transcriptions into code to look for themes and commonalities. The qualitative data collected allowed the researcher to discern possible common challenges and goals of Ed.D. students. Identified factors that participants defined can

also be considered for the study. Mentimeter's Word Cloud assisted the researcher to discern possible patterns and themes. This was added as an extension on the Google Document.

Ethical Considerations

Privacy laws prohibit accessibility to student records. A forced field in the survey will not allow a person to answer questions if they did not consent. Students were free to decide not to participate in the focus group or to withdraw at any time without affecting the relationship with the researcher or study. The informed consent data will be stored in Google Drive, which is only accessible to the researcher. This data will be stored until 2025 and then deleted from the online drive. The risks were minimal to the participant. Participants were reminded that if they felt uncomfortable they could withdraw at any time without consequence. There were no benefits to participation, however the individuals may have enjoyed knowing they were contributing to the continual improvement of the CPED Ed.D. program.

Anonymity & Confidentiality

Transcription, informed consent, and audio-tape data were stored on the researcher's personal password protected Google Drive. This collected information will be saved for two years and then erased from the researcher's personal computer. Participants were given pseudonyms, and all efforts were given to maintain confidentiality. Participants were told at the beginning of each focus group that what was mentioned in the focus group should remain in the focus group and not shared with others. Pseudonyms and/or numbers were given to any names mentioned in the audio tapes such as professors, schools, and other students etc.

Quality of Data

The Tinto and Bean models of attrition, which demonstrates patterns of dropout behavior, assisted this researcher in organizing the survey data. Specifically, Tinto sought to separate factors such as academic failure and voluntary withdrawal. Using this dropout behavior model,

economics, academic load, and the social process of stopping one's education were utilized to organize survey answers (Tinto, 1975).

Data Analysis

Focus group data was transcribed for the researcher to search for themes and commonalities. The qualitative data collected may allow the researcher to discern possible common challenges and goals of Ed.D. students. Identified stress factors that participants defined can also be considered. Mentimeter's Word Cloud assisted the researcher to discern patterns and common themes.

Limitations and Delimitations

The researcher acknowledged and was aware of any personal biases when examining data provided by her cohort members. The researcher journaled after each focus group to acknowledge any bias she may have had while interviewing the group. Factors such as feelings that make the respondent feel embarrassed or upset may have caused participants to limit their responses. The researcher's background in school counseling and providing open-ended questioning, which may make the group feel comfortable sharing ideas, was a strength.

Summary

Chapter 3 described the research design, focus group guiding question, and data collection methods. Recruitment of current and former doctoral students from this founding member of a CPED Ed.D. program was also discussed. Chapter 4 will provide the results of these focus groups.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Introduction

Many doctoral students need support with completing their dissertations and avoid being labeled as "all but dissertation." Ed.D. students work within a framework of a dissertation in practice (DIP). This research aimed to gather information on Ed.D. students' experiences in their doctoral programs. Through focus groups and the coded identification of participants' themes, the study also provided shared facets of struggles and support of doctoral students.

Focus groups can effectively provide insights into a particular topic or issue because they allow for a structured and moderated discussion among a small group of individuals with a shared interest or experience related to that topic or issue (Caillaud, Nikos, & Doumergue, 2022). Here, the researcher created an opportunity for CPED Ed.D. students at one institution to discuss their experiences in their doctoral program.

Summary of Analyses

After receiving approval from the IRB, the researcher launched this study by sending email invitations to all cohorts past and present of the Ed.D. program (Appendix B). The data consisted of the following students by expected conferral year and show how many students were enrolled by year.

Table 1

Number of Students by Cohort Years

College of Education EdD Program	
Conferral year	Number of Students by Cohort Year
2012-2013	10

2013-2014	7
2014-2015	6
2015-2016	21
2016-2017	20
2017-2018	14
2018-2019	20
2019-2020	19
2020-2021	23
2021-2022	17

The emails were sent in alphabetical order in groups of ten. Because of human error, the first five groups went out without using the "bcc" option. This transgression may have affected the number of participants. One student emailed the IRB chair, indicating they were upset with this unintentional error.

Informed consent was obtained from interested cohort members. Zoom invitations were sent to discuss the lived experiences of an Ed.D. student to those current and former students who wanted to participate. The invitations included an informed consent reminder and the researcher's contact information. Additionally, the time commitment and confidentiality regarding the study were reviewed (Appendix C). Participants were reminded to use pseudonyms and the ability to keep their cameras off to protect their confidentiality. Four focus groups were offered to these participants to choose the best day and time to participate. These dates were Eastern Standard Time on April 19 at 6:00 PM, April 20 at 7:00 PM, April 22 at 8:00 AM, and

April 25 at 6:00 PM. The following table shows the number of participants who attended the meetings.

Figure 4 represents the survey responses collected by the researcher. Twenty-six former doctoral students (93%) agreed to informed consent and participation in the online focus group. Only two respondents (7%) selected not to participate.

Figure 4

Responses from Informed Consent Emails
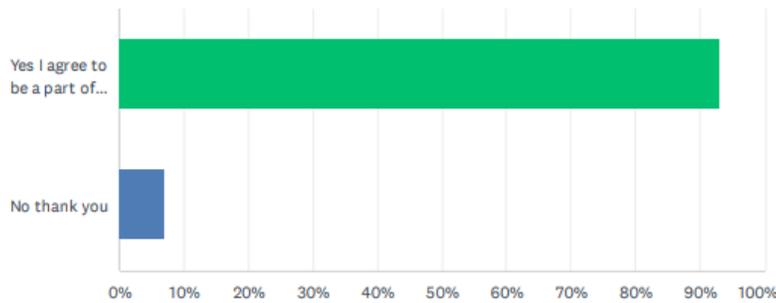
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes I agree to be a part of this focus group	92.86%	26
No thank you	7.14%	2
Total Respondents: 28		

The researcher received twenty-eight responses to the survey. Two responded that they were not interested in participating. The twenty-six others selected the day and time of the preferred focus group. This is 9.5% of the total enrolled doctoral students. Invitations were sent to join the focus groups according to their preferred availability. All groups were anonymous. The researcher did not track which participant was a student who completed their dissertation, was ABD, or was still in the doctoral program.

It is important to note that a focus group was offered on April 22; however, no one attended this weekend option. Eight respondents did not sign on for the focus groups that they

previously selected. The researcher did receive three emails from Ed.D. students who thanked the researcher for wanting to have a discussion regarding their doctoral experiences. Two of the three participants joined in the focus groups while the third did not attend.

At the start of the Zoom meetings, the script was read to all members in attendance (Appendix E). An open Google document transcribed the participants' exchanges using the computer microphone. The question, "Tell me about your experience in your Ed.D. program," was asked by the researcher. Participants shared their stories with the groups. The researcher allowed each person to discuss their experience without interruption. Participants seemed eager to share their stories in the focus groups. When one participant began, the others muted themselves. As the next participant spoke, many agreed with the previous comments and expanded on their reply. Before time ended, the researcher asked for any last comments. Each of the three groups asked about the next steps, specifically if any recommendations would be suggested due to the focus groups. The researcher thanked the focus groups and replied that all suggestions would be shared in her dissertation. Other members remarked that they would like to be a part of any additional opportunities to share their feedback. One focus group participant said they described their participation as "therapeutic" and "a story that they had been wanting to tell" and thanked the researcher for sharing the forum. Group three was the most eager to share their experiences, resulting in the longest session time of 59 minutes. This was also the largest group with 11 attending participants.

After the three focus groups were concluded, the Google Doc notes were coded individually by date. The documents were then combined into one Google Doc, including the focus group data from all three focus group dates. The researcher then utilized the Google Word Cloud extension to extrapolate the qualitative data. Reflexivity is the idea that a researcher's

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preconceptions and biases can influence decisions and actions throughout qualitative research

activities (Johnson & Chauvin, 2020). A researcher's background, beliefs, and experiences may

affect any aspect of the research, from choosing which question to investigate to determining

how to present the results. The researcher acknowledged the potential of personal bias as a

doctoral student.The focus group data from the combined meeting dates generated a theme from

the researcher's codes. The results of this study presented a collection of themes that emerged

from the researcher's focus groups. These findings will be discussed in the Summary of Results

section below.

Sample

The twenty-eight respondents were identified as past or present students of the college's

Ed.D. program. Because of the anonymous nature of this study, the researcher collected no

identifying identification information from the responders.

Table 2

Total Number of Participants that Participated in the Survey(s)

Focus Group Date	Group 1 4/19/23	Group 2 4/20	Group 3 4/25
Number of Participants	4 participants	3 participants	11 participants
Length of Focus Group	40 minutes in length	40 minutes in length	59 minutes in duration

Results of the Research Question

The research question asked survey participants to discuss their lived experiences in their Ed.D. program. The researcher continually acknowledged the potential of personal bias as a doctoral student. Reflexivity was utilized to reduce preconceptions and influences (Johnson & Chauvin, 2020). A reflective journal was also used to record emerging themes, methodological challenges, thoughts, and reflections on the research process.

From the research and coded data themes, the researcher identified shared content in the form of a Word Cloud below. This was a result of combining all three focus groups transcriptions and using the Word Cloud generator which is a Google extension. A word cloud is a visual representation of text data in which the size of each word indicates its frequency or importance within a given text set. It provides a quick and intuitive way to grasp the most common words and their significance in a document, website, or other textual data. Based on the frequency of each word, the words are assigned sizes for display in the word cloud. The more frequently a word appears, the larger it will be in the word cloud. This sizing is done to visually represent the importance or relevance of each word within the given text. Finally, the word cloud is generated by placing the words in the appropriate sizes and orientations on the display area. The words are often arranged randomly or clustered, with more powerful words given more prominent placement. The result is a visual representation where the most frequently used or important words stand out and are easily noticeable.

FIGURE 5 *Word Cloud of Transcribed Focus Groups*

The most commonly mentioned theme was "dissertation." This topic included writing the dissertation, support or lack thereof during the dissertation process, and selecting a topic for the dissertation. The discussion of the dissertation was described as "harrowing," "a passion," and "a nightmare." Many participants agreed with feeling alone during this process. Others mentioned that having a cohort for support was essential to working through their dissertations. Three participants discussed how they came into the program with their dissertation topic decided. This critical decision already in place allowed them to work continuously on their dissertation while completing their doctoral program.

The second top component of the Ed.D. program experience was "professors and chairperson(s)." It is important to note that this was reported as both positive support and sometimes unfavorable to the respondents. A member of focus group three described her experience as being "challenging" and caused her to ask for feedback from another professor to assist. They also mentioned that their motivation and support from their cohort were "pivotal" to their success. This participant had never worked with their chairperson before and described the

connection as "horrible." Other members discussed positive experiences with their dissertation committee and chairperson. Three participants shared that they felt connected to their committee members because they had them as professors in their programs. Focus group members mentioned having a part in selecting their committee and chairperson, while others did not have a selection choice. There are several years of cohort members in this data, and differences in the dissertation process should be noted. There could be changes in how the doctoral student's committee was decided over time.

The third most commonly mentioned theme was"program." This topic included "cohort, classes, and course layout." These focus group discussions included resources and direction. Specifically, using the library, dissertation handbook, and access for help were common topics. Participants were polarized regarding the topic of the cohort. A cohort was a place of belonging for many participants. Three focus group members discussed not fitting in with others and having negative experiences. One participant, who had been out of the doctoral program for several years, had trouble with knowing who to reach out to for help. She discussed changing professors and wasn't sure who to contact. All three members mentioned missing a semester, resulting in being a part of other cohorts to make up for the missing classes. This lapse of time created added stressors for these three participants. These also included difficulty connecting with others, conflicting work ethics, and meeting challenges. More discussion of themes will be reported in the summary of results.

Summary of Results

Chapter IV discussed the results of focus groups that discussed their lived experiences during their doctoral programs. Themes emerged, and several participants made connections with each other while sharing their stories. The themes connect to the literature review where

academic, social-psychological, and socialization factors were mentioned in Bean's Causal Model of Student Attrition (1980). Tinto's dropout model (1975) also includes themes of academic support which was reiterated in the researcher's focus groups. Specifically, academic and social integration are critical factors in retention.

The researcher collected data from three different focus groups. Each group was asked the same prompt, "Tell me your experience in your Ed.D. program."

The qualitative data were analyzed by coding and generating themes using Google's Word Cloud extension. Three themes emerged

1. Program
2. Professor/ Chairperson
3. Dissertation

Students frequently discussed the courses, cohort members, professor(s),connection to their chairperson, and dissertation as answers to the researcher's open-ended prompt. These identified themes connect back to Tinto's Model of Dropout from College (Figure 1). The connection to faculty and peer groups were identified as being important to student attrition (Tinto, 1975).

Chapter V will review and connect the researcher's data to implications for practice and recommendations for future research. Ideas generated from the focus groups will be discussed and shared.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

This study sought to answer the question, What are the lived experiences of Ed.D. doctoral students at this founding CPED institution of higher education who struggled to finish their dissertations and remain "all but dissertation" ABD? In Chapter I, the problem of more than half of the students beginning their doctorate studies still needed to complete their dissertations was introduced. Educated members of a community benefit society (Golde, 2013). Through a review of the literature in chapter two, the history of attrition was presented through the lens of Tinto (1975), Beeler (1991), and Bean (2005). Chapter three discussed the reasoning why the researcher used a focus group to collect data. Focus group interview data from Ed.D. students

were collected to gather information on their lived experiences and was presented in chapter four. Chapter V concludes this study and provides implications and recommendations for future research.

Summary of Results

Human beings are social and need connections to others to survive (Slavich, 2020). The focus groups allowed connections to form over a single research question, "what is your experience in your Ed.D. program?". The researcher's collection of data from focus groups demonstrates why supporting these valuable CPED Ed.D. students is important for future success.

The researcher offered doctoral students the opportunity to share their doctoral experiences through a focus group setting. Data was transcribed, and the resulting themes were presented in this research. Doctoral attrition has impacted many programs over time (Ames, Berman, & Casteel, 2018). Losing these highly skilled students results in loss to a community and academia (Bagaka et al., 2015). Lake et al. (2018) reiterated doctoral students' support by addressing motivation and having supportive faculty through a cohort model. Three themes emerged from the researcher's focus groups. These were the dissertation, professor/ chairperson, and program related to references in the literature review. Key phrases directly connect these identified themes, such as "mental push," connection," and "people." Previously mentioned research by pioneers such as Bean (1980) and Tinto (1975) identified internal and external challenges. Providing more opportunities for doctoral students to share their ideas could assist in creating practical support. The resulting idea of a doctoral support group and networking for dissertation assistance could directly aid future doctoral students. Connecting these facets by exploring and supporting the doctoral students' motivation could be essential for success.

Challenges are part of the doctoral students journey. Professors and former doctoral students can support their students effectively in many ways (Hill & Conceição, 2020) . By checking on their student's mental health, adult doctoral students can discuss any challenges and fears. Doctoral student support allows a connection to the university and aids with persistence (Tinto, 1975).

Assigning mentors who were former doctoral students could also aid in student attrition. These relationships between colleagues and professors align with goal-setting and open, supportive dialogue (Hill & Conceição, 2020).

Limitations

The relationship with the researcher may have affected focus group attendance and responses. Specifically, the researcher's cohort members may have felt more comfortable sharing their thoughts. Conversely, others may have advanced knowledge of the researcher's dissertation topic and therefore adapted answers to share.

Another limitation was the researcher's human error when sending invites to the focus group. The first few blocks of invitations were not sent as blind copies. Individuals who were invitees could see who else was invited to participate in the focus groups. This error may have negatively affected participation from Ed. D. students.

Limitations included the challenges presented by anonymous focus groups. Unless the individual specifically mentioned their status, the researcher did not know the participants' cohort or if they had graduated. This includes any doctoral students who may have had significant challenges while living through COVID-19.

The researcher's experience with the doctoral program may have also created challenges with the data. Although journaling, reflexivity, and bracketing responses on the transcripts were practiced, the researcher tried to reduce any bias from influencing data.

Having trained as a licensed school counselor did challenge the researcher. They could not show empathic counselor-like behavior during the focus groups. The researcher had a visual reminder on her computer screen, which read, "No feelings, just facts," to keep the data cleaner.

Implications for Practice

A student failing to complete a doctoral program is psychologically damaging and monetarily expensive (Blanchard, 2018; Ames, Berman & Casteel, 2018, p. 84) . Being ABD negatively impacts the faculty involved and damages an institution's reputation. (Golde, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Having educated individuals benefits society. Ed.D. students contribute research to better learning. They are also our future leaders of academia and shape policy and influence educational practice with their studies. Doctoral students impact the economy by creating new technology and jobs. Supporting doctoral students is crucial for maintaining global competitiveness. In an increasingly globalized world, countries and institutions that invest in education and research will have a competitive advantage over those that do not (Ames, Berman & Casteel, 2018, p. 84; D'Andrea, 2013; Bagaka et al., 2015).

Several focus group members reflected on the course layout of the doctoral program. Specifically, arranging the courses to flow more synchronously with each other to assist with progression. This change could mean changing the summer courses for more time to work on them. For example, a student mentioned EDU 704, Action Research, could be a two-weekend course to allow more time to work on critical assignments. This class is a summer institute course that occurs over four consecutive days. By spreading the course over two months,

students can spend more time immersing themselves in the material. This lengthened time also allows connection to the student's dissertation.

Resources and knowledge of support while in the CPED Ed.D. program is essential. Many focus group participants reported stumbling on the dissertation handbook. This resource has the dissertation layout and other helpful pieces to learn more about the doctoral journey. Professors can reference this helpful resource and remind students. The dissertation handbook presents APA formatting, the IRB process, and ideas on building relationships with a dissertation committee. Being familiar with this resource can allow a doctoral student to become more familiar with the process. Another facet of resources is the librarian(s) in this program. There is a dedicated research assistant who can assist with references on dissertation topics. Additionally, other staff members are there for any writing challenges that students may have. This resource could be beneficial for the students who mentioned previous academic challenges. Balancing the academic workload can help a doctoral student towards success (Ali & Kohun, 2016).

Consistency between doctorate courses was another topic of discussion in the researcher's focus groups. Similar assignments were given in different classes. Students reported feeling annoyed upon learning of having to complete work that was asked in a previous course. CPED designs a doctorate-in-practice type of program to target an everyday educational concern. The researcher's question asked about the lived experiences of doctoral students. Consistent prescribed movement throughout the program could ease the confusion that was mentioned.

Some students entered the Ed.D. program at what they described as a time of loss. Many suffered through the death of a family member, illness, struggles with a career, and parenting challenges. Focus group attendees described balancing these difficulties while working on weekend classes as a colossal hurdle. Having a connection for support during these life

challenges is essential. As stated in the introduction, Universities play an integral part in the success of a doctoral student (Bagaka et al., 2015). Educated experts are valued members of society (Golde, 2013). Keeping doctoral students from dropping out is vital for the future.

Group work in some classes was a topic discussed by some students. Here, students reported many group assignments being assigned by professors. At times this was complicated by classmates' schedules, being in other states, and lack of follow through. These lived experiences which were discussed in the researcher's focus groups, brought out several roadblocks for doctoral students. Navigating parenting, working full-time, and other job-related stressors were identified as essential items needing support (Corner, Lofstrom, & Pyhalto, 2017). Addressing doctoral students' mental health and continuing motivation can be assisted with resources, support, and continuity of a doctoral program (Sverdlik et al., 2018).

A topic formulated in one focus group was the idea of a doctoral orientation support group. This participant discussed how they had this type of interaction in a previous master's program. This topic evolved into a conversation about planning an event where cohorts past and present could gather to share ideas. Others mentioned networking opportunities from this exchange as they felt they needed more employment support. Additionally, networking with other cohort members can make connections to future research partnerships (Ali & Kohun, 2016).These important connections can be supported and increase the motivation needed to avoid ABD (Evans et al., 2018).

 Many doctoral students are beginning a new academic chapter and last visited a university setting a while ago. Two participants mentioned how they struggled through their master's programs. Writing a research paper and finding the support to pursue their doctorate was described as "challenging." Zhou, 2015 discussed the importance of motivation and contributing

to research can influence keeping someone in a doctorate program. A connection to the college that can support building relationships with the research and academic community could be an essential guide for a doctoral student (Greener, 2020).

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research could include soliciting current cohort members to see if they would be interested in a doctoral support group. This group could utilize the expertise of a school counselor who could review topics such as stress reduction, goal setting, and navigating life challenges. Participation would be voluntary, and feedback could provide the Ed. D. program with ideas to improve student connection. Additionally, any relationships with the researcher resulting in bias could be eliminated by using other cohort members.

Recommendations for Practice

Practical support for doctoral students is critical to their success in completing their studies, personal life, and careers. Tinto (1975) and Bean (1980) began the discussion by identifying critical variables of dropout behavior. Working with these stressors and prioritizing the needs of doctoral students could better support these students (Zambo, Zambo, Buss, Perry, & Williams, 2014). Here are some key elements that can contribute to critical support:

- Clear expectations and goals: Doctoral students should have clear expectations and goals for their studies, including timelines and milestones for completion. This clarity can help them stay on track and progress toward their degree. Chapter II identified persistence and how it is essential to earning a degree (Spaulding, Rocinson-Szapkiw, 2012).

- Access to resources: Ed.D. students need various resources, including support services such as libraries, writing centers, and academic advisors. These resources can help them set goals, research, and complete their studies. Evans et al. (2018) discussed the

importance of scaffolded academic support. By reminders of resources, doctoral students can access targeted assistance when needed.

- Mentorship and guidance: Doctoral students can benefit from a mentor or advisor who can support them throughout their studies. This mentor can help them to develop their research ideas, provide feedback on their work, and connect them with other experts in their field. Connecting the Ed.D. student with this person early can evolve into their identified chairperson. This connectivity relates to Tinto's study (1975) on the importance of faculty and peer relationships. Well-planned doctoral programs allow a relationship between the committee and doctoral students (Davis, 2019).

- Professional development: Opportunities to develop their professional skills and network with others in their field were a common theme in this study. These professional connections can include attending conferences, participating in workshops, and engaging with industry professionals. Another identified need was job assistance. These networking opportunities may evolve into connecting with a future employment connection, dissertation group work, and future research opportunities. Connectivity to a college or university is a critical determinant of persistence (Tinto, 1975). Allowing these professional connections will allow the continuation of persistence and success.

- Support for work-life balance: Doctoral students often face intense pressure to produce high-quality research while balancing other responsibilities such as family and work. Providing support for work-life balance, such as flexible schedules and access to counseling services, can help them to manage these demands and reduce stress. Mental health is a critical part of being successful in a doctoral program. Cooke (2020) reported that doctoral students have the highest reported anxiety. Adding support through a

doctoral support program run by a mental health professional could alleviate these

stressors and offer help.

By prioritizing and including some of these elements, universities and research institutions can

effectively support doctoral students and help them achieve success in their studies and future

careers.

Bringing together past and present cohort members could present an opportunity to gather

and share ideas. Additionally, students looking to connect with others regarding their dissertation

topics could be explored in this forum.

Uniform data collection for all colleges and universities could be standardized. The data

ticket which allowed the data analyst to pull specific data should be the same when seeking

attrition patterns. Several studies posit models and themes of doctoral attrition. Each researcher

can ask for different data, yet all are saying that the attrition rates are 40-60%.

Another example of why this uniformity is needed is looking at the data pulled for this

dissertation. At the time of acquisition, the cohort 20 population was not listed as being

graduated. The column did not have the "y" indicating that they had met the requirements for

graduation. The 55% attrition rate would have been higher if this had been populated.

How are colleges and universities tracking doctoral students' graduation rates? For this

study, the data tracked the cohort year, the exit date, and if the student had met the requirements

for graduation. They could track whether the doctoral student successfully defended their

dissertation and met the graduation requirements. These numbers could be very different if those

crucial parts of a graduated doctoral student were tracked.

Summary

The research in this study sought to identify lived experiences at one educational doctorate-granting institution of higher education. Insight into the challenges doctoral students experience while working through a Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) and other Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) programs may provide insight to the institution to improve the Ed.D. Program.

Doctoral students have many challenges. Discussing personal struggles, connecting with cohort members, and writing a dissertation were presented. Students are asking for changes to course layout, participating in events with other doctoral students, and connecting with others.

Ultimately, reducing attrition in doctoral programs requires a comprehensive approach that addresses doctoral students' diverse needs and challenges. Providing adequate support, resources, and opportunities, programs can help students complete their degrees and achieve their academic and professional goals.

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APPENDIX A: EMAILS TO GAIN STUDY/PARTICIPANT ENTRY

Subject: Request for data collection

Dear Ms. Genoese,

My name is Kimberly Carlo, and I am a doctorate student at Lynn University. I am writing regarding the possibility of obtaining the emails of your Ed.D. students. My dissertation would solicit voluntary data through focus groups regarding the attrition of CPED Ed.D. students.

We plan to use this data to find commonalities with doctoral students struggling to finish dissertations. This study seeks to understand doctorate students and focus on challenges that inhibit them from reaching their goals. It analyzes goal commitment and personal priorities and their significance to dissertation completion. This study analyzes the motivation and goals of doctoral students and how goal setting can work towards completing a dissertation.

I am grateful for your consideration of my request. I pledge to adhere to any stipulations you deem fit and follow the IRB recommendations.

Thank you,

Kimmie Carlo

Lynn University

APPENDIX B: Sample Email to Students

Greetings!

I am a doctoral student at Lynn University's Ross College of Education. My dissertation is WHAT'S UP DOC? AN EXAMINATION OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES AFFECTING ABD IN THE ED.D STUDENT. The research will examine why individuals struggle to finish their dissertations and graduate while working through their Ed.D. program.

Please click the link below if you agree to participate in the study. The link will take you to the informed consent needed to begin. The process should take approximately 3-5 minutes.

INSERT SURVEY MONKEY INFORMED CONSENT LINK

I will send an email with information regarding informed consent and the dates/ times of the focus groups.

Please get in touch with me with any questions. I appreciate your time and support.

Best,

Kimmie Carlo

kcarlo@email.lynn.edu

518-929-3334

* 1. INFORMED CONSENT

Dear Participant,

The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study,WHAT'S UP DOC? AN EXAMINATION OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES AFFECTING ABD IN THE ED.D STUDENT. You should be aware that you are free to decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without affecting the relationship with the researcher or study. The approximate time to complete this survey is five minutes.

The purpose of this study is to understand the attrition rates of Ed. D. students who are in CPED programs. The study will provide information on how doctoral students can be supported in their program. Your informed consent will be gathered from this online process to join in a focus group and may assist future educators in improving attrition rates and supporting students. Participating in this focus group may have minimal risks such as possibly feeling uncomfortable or anxious by question content. At any time, you may stop and choose not to participate. Your answers will be destroyed. Choosing not to participate will not affect your status with your doctoral program. This focus group does not have any benefits; however; you may enjoy sharing your knowledge and experience with your doctoral program.

If you agree to participate, you will complete two activities. For the first activity, you will indicate that you are willing to participate in this study by agreeing with the informed consent online form. Secondly, you will be a part of the online recorded Zoom focus group to discuss your experience in your doctoral program. Your camera and others will not be turned on, and you will sign in using a pseudonym. No identifiable data will be collected. The Zoom focus group will be no longer than 45 - 60 minutes.

The transcribed information will be coded using your pseudonym. Your name will not be associated with the research findings in any way. Instead, you will be given a pseudonym such as Participant #1, Participant #2, etc.

The data will be kept on my password-protected personal computer's Google Drive. The transcription will be destroyed in 2028.

Do not hesitate to ask any questions about the study before, during, or after participating. I will be happy to share my findings with you after the research is completed.

Please indicate your consent with full knowledge of the nature and purpose of the study. A copy of this consent form will be provided upon request. Thank you for your participation.

Kimberly Carlo, M.Ed.

Doctoral Student

Lynn University

kcarlo@email.lynn.edu

518-929-3334

IRB Chair: Dr. Jennifer Lesh

561-237-7082

jlesh@lynn.edu

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Brittany Kiser

561-237-7003

bkiser@lynn.edu

APPENDIX D: Survey to Select Focus Groups/ Day/ Time

Hello (NAME OF PARTICIPANT)

Thank you for completing my survey's informed consent. Your responses indicated that you would be willing to join a focus group via Zoom. If you are still willing, please select a date/ time below to indicate that you are available to meet via Zoom.

As a reminder, the Zoom will be recorded for transcription. I expect the focus group to run for 45-60 minutes. Once a date/ time is selected, I will send you a link to participate. You will be able to log in on your phone or computer.

INSERT DATE/AVAILABILITY SELECTION LINK HERE

Thank you so much for your participation in my research.

Best,

Kimmie Carlo

kcarlo@email.lynn.edu

518-929-3334

APPENDIX E: Script at the Start of the Focus Group

Hello, and thank you for agreeing to be part of my research study; WHAT'S UP DOC? AN

EXAMINATION OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES AFFECTING ABD IN THE ED.D

STUDENT.

Your participation is voluntary, and you can leave Zoom at any time without penalty. This is a

confidential focus group, and I will not use any identifying information in my dissertation. Please

remember that this will be recorded for my research purposes. All transcripts and recordings will

be kept on a private personal computer that is password protected. This data is only accessible to

the researcher. Are there any questions before we begin?

Please feel free to stop me at any time during Zoom if you have any questions or concerns. I will

now begin recording this meeting.

Tell me about your experience in the Ed.D. Program

Possible follow-up questions:

- What was the most challenging part of earning your doctoral degree?

- What advice would you give to people who want to earn their doctoral degree?

At the end of the interview: Thank you for your participation today. If there are any questions or concerns please feel free to reach out to me.

APPENDIX F: SURVEY PROTOCOLS - INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Table 3 Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

Question

Tell me about your experience in the Ed.D. Program

Possible follow up questions:

- What was the most challenging part of earning your doctoral degree?

- What advice would you give to people who want to earn their doctoral degree?

APPENDIX G: IRB APPROVAL(S)

LYNN
UNIVERSITY

Institutional Review Board
3601 North Military Trail
Boca Raton, FL 33433
T: 561-237-7012
561-237-7000 | lynn.edu
Jennifer J. Lesh, Ph.D., IRB Chair

DATE: 3/29/2023
TO: Carlo
FROM: Jennifer Lesh
PROJECT NUMBER: 22.20
PROTOCOL TITLE: *What's Up Doc? An Examination of Lived Experiences Affecting ABD in Ed.D. Students*

PROJECT TYPE: New
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: 3/29/2023
EXPIRATION DATE: 03/28/2024

Thank you for your submission for this research study. The Lynn University IRB has APPROVED your NEW Project. This approval is in accordance with 45 CFR §46.111 Criteria for IRB approval of research. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

It is important that you retain this letter for your records and present upon request to necessary parties.

- This approval is valid for one year. **IRB Form 4: Application to Continue (Renew) a Previously Approved Project** will be required prior to the expiration date if this project continues beyond one year.
- Please note that any revision to previously approved materials or procedures must be approved by the IRB29 before it is initiated. Please submit **IRB Form 5 Application for Procedural Revisions of or Changes in Research Protocol and/or Informed Consent Form 1 of a Previously Approved Project** for this procedure.
- All serious and unexpected adverse events must be reported to the IRB. Please use **IRB Form 6 Report of Unexpected Adverse Event, Serious Injury or Death** for this procedure.
- At the completion of your data collection, please submit **IRB Form 8 IRB Report of Termination of Project.**

If you have any questions or comments about this correspondence, please contact the chair of the Lynn University IRB, Jennifer Lesh (jlesh@lynn.edu).

Dr. Jennifer J. Lesh, Institutional Review Board Chair
Institutional Review Board
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