ANCHORING AND ACTIVATING TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP: HOW AN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP DOCTORAL PROGRAM CULTIVATES BELONGING AND TRUST

By

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examined how East Carolina University's Doctor of Education (EdD) International Cohort in Educational Leadership advances learning from transactional routines toward transformational outcomes. The study addressed the broader problem that online professional doctorates often prioritize efficiency and credentialing over adult development, specifically in terms of belonging and trust. The purpose was to analyze how the International Cohort's design creates conditions for persistence, growth, and leadership practice grounded in fairness and inclusion. Three research questions guided the inquiry: (a) How does the program's learning environment shape transformational development? (b) In what ways do course-embedded opportunities contribute to adult development and leadership practice? Moreover, (c) How do participants interpret and describe the program's attention to equity, inclusive practices, and critical engagement with institutional norms as influencing their leadership and organizational improvement approaches?

A qualitative single-case study examined two cohorts of the EdD program across learning environments, including a Summer Learning Exchange in Bangkok, synchronous WebExchanges, and online coursework. Data were drawn from syllabi, program documents, and student artifacts. Analysis followed constant-comparison methods informed by theories of transformative learning, adult development, and equity as rigor.

Two overarching findings emerged. Finding 1, Design Anchors: Belonging, Trust, and Adult Development, showed that identity-based assignments, collaborative routines, and faculty presence cultivated psychological safety and persistence. Finding 2: Design Activators—Praxis for Organizational and Systemic Improvement demonstrated that equity-focused inquiry, participatory projects, and critical reflection translated learning into leadership practice.

The study concludes that transformational program design depends on intentionally braiding anchoring and activating forces. When belonging, trust, and adult development intertwine with equity, reflection, and applied leadership, the program becomes a mechanism for meaningful change in professional learning. This braided design, conceptualized as the **Helix of Transformation,** illustrates how environment, opportunity, and equity-informed practice can transition online doctoral study from transactional routines to transformational outcomes. For students, the framework describes how intentional design cultivates belonging and leadership capacity; for faculty, it offers a roadmap for creating cohesive, reflective, and equity-minded learning environments. The International EdD contributes a blueprint for redesigning online professional doctorates that are academically rigorous, relational, developmental, and relevant to practice.

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A Dissertation

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DEDICATION

To my husband, whose unwavering love and patience made this journey possible. You carried extra loads—children, errands, and life's endless lists—so I could carry this dream. Your belief in me has been my steady anchor and greatest gift.

To my daughters, whose curiosity and courage inspire everything I do. I began this journey to show you it could be done, but my most profound hope is that this work helps shape a world where your learning and leadership can flourish.

To my mom, your daughter is a doctor! From that summer orientation at ECU in 1998 to this moment, your strength has never left my side. I've often thought of the challenges you faced and the opportunities you deserved. This work carries my wish that every learner finds the encouragement, support, and belonging you once needed.

To my grandparents, whose unwavering faith and goodness have been constant lights in my life. Your devotion to God, your family, and honest work has shaped the kind of person and scholar I strive to be. I am deeply grateful to share this joy with you.

To my friends who are my chosen family—thank you for cheering me on, keeping life steady, and letting Char tag along so I could write. Your laughter and loyalty sustained me through every chapter.

In memory of my dad, whose journey reminded me to make the most of my own. Though our paths were often different, your story gave me the courage to stop postponing and begin.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Professional doctorates carry dual promises: access to advanced study and meaningful impact on professional practice. For many students, they offer personal growth and career advancement. However, prospective candidates must discern whether a program provides more than a credentialing pathway. The central question becomes whether programs can design coursework that moves beyond transactional routines to foster the transformational development leaders require. This dissertation investigates one such program, the Doctor of Education (EdD) International Cohort (Off-Model) in Educational Leadership at East Carolina University (ECU), hereafter referred to as the International EdD and examines the experiences of its students and alumni.

Although graduate programs often advertise transformational benefits, many rely too heavily on narrow promises of career advancement or on transactional structures, such as assignments, exams, and credit hours. This pattern is particularly evident in the rapid growth of online higher education. By 2018, one-third of nearly 19.7 million postsecondary students were enrolled in online courses, with almost 40% of graduate students participating (Costa et al., 2021). In educational leadership specifically, approximately 43% of programs offered fully online pathways by 2020, a dramatic increase from the previous decade (Perrone et al., 2020). However, the market remains concentrated, with many large national providers enrolling the majority of students, while smaller universities compete with fewer resources (Cheslock & Jaquette, 2021).

In 2016, ECU reimagined the traditional EdD in Educational Leadership online for a national and international audience. The result was the establishment of the international cohort program as an Off-Model program. Off-Model programs operate outside of traditional state

funding models. Rather than drawing on state appropriations or counting toward full-time equivalency, they are funded directly through alternative tuition and fees. This structure enables flexibility, innovation, and sustainability, while requiring careful program design and accountability.

The International EdD targets mid-career professionals in global and cross-cultural contexts who are committed to leadership that advances fairness and access. The program blends primarily online learning with intensive Summer Learning Exchanges abroad, creating space for collaboration, reflection, and participatory action research. For busy practicing educators responsible for schools, districts, and agencies, the stakes of doctoral study are high in terms of time and financial commitment. Therefore, the program's design positions coursework as the primary lever for transformational learning, not optional extras outside the classroom. A fuller description of the program's context, history, and design features is provided in Chapter 3.

Background and Context

Online education has reshaped both undergraduate and graduate study in the United States. At the undergraduate level, online courses have expanded access for students who might otherwise be excluded because of geography, work, or family obligations. Many of these students are women, first-generation learners, or from low-income backgrounds (Mead et al., 2020; Hoey, 2020). While online pathways broaden access, they also reveal persistent challenges, including lower completion rates compared to face-to-face programs (Ortagus et al., 2024) and achievement gaps across demographic groups (Mead et al., 2020).

Graduate and professional programs have followed similar patterns. As enrollment in online master's and doctoral programs has increased, institutions have often relied on efficiency-oriented course structures, such as discussion boards, quizzes, and modular assignments,

prioritizing delivery over depth. For undergraduates, such approaches may lead to disengagement or dropout; for graduate students, they risk reducing doctoral education to transactional tasks that fail to support developmental growth or leadership practice.

The literature reveals significant gaps between traditional student development theories and approaches that are more suitable for adult learners. Conventional theories primarily emphasize U.S.-based undergraduates and often overlook diverse student populations, including international students and those with disabilities (Liu & Lin, 2024; Shpigelman et al., 2021). Faculty preparation typically emphasizes student development theory; however, these frameworks offer limited guidance for supporting adults in online contexts (Hengesteg et al., 2021). By contrast, adult learning and development theories offer richer explanatory power. Models of identity formation, self-regulation, and expert performance deepen understanding of longitudinal growth (Janke et al., 2024). Cross-cultural perspectives underscore the importance of inclusive approaches to development (Amir & McAuliffe, 2020).

Research at both undergraduate and graduate levels demonstrates that when programs intentionally align design with adult learning principles, they are more likely to foster persistence and transformational outcomes (Brieger et al., 2020). Graduate education, particularly at the doctoral level, should cultivate increasingly complex ways of knowing and acting, rather than merely transmitting content knowledge. However, many online programs reproduce lectures and test routines in digital form. In Argyris and Schön's (1978) terms, this reflects single-loop learning, which involves adjusting within existing frames, rather than double-loop learning, which challenges the underlying assumptions and values that guide practice. The International EdD deliberately pursues the latter. By embedding opportunities for reflection, collaborative inquiry, and contextual analysis, it seeks to transform leaders' perspectives and practice.

~~Problem~~ Focus of Practice

This study examines how course design features, embedded in the International EdD, foster transformational learning and adult development among practicing educators. The section title, ~~Problem~~ Focus of Practice, reflects a deliberate linguistic and philosophical choice made by the program. Rather than framing leadership challenges as problems to be fixed, the International EdD repositions them as foci for inquiry, areas of possibility that invite developmentally responsive learning and continuous improvement. Striking through "Problem" signals a rejection of deficit-oriented thinking and an embrace of asset-based, collaborative inquiry.

Specifically, this study examines which aspects of the program's learning environment foster growth, which may unintentionally constrain it, and how these dynamics impact candidates' leadership practices.

The expansion of online professional doctorates has not consistently yielded stronger program design. Common routines, such as discussion boards with superficial responses or quizzes focused on recall, may keep students busy but rarely alter how they understand their work. Although the International EdD was built with transformational goals in mind, its online format still risks drifting toward transactional patterns.

A key design choice reflects this tension: the program's focus of practice framework reframes inquiry as an opportunity for ethical and developmentally responsive leadership rather than a reaction to a problem in need of correction. Accordingly, the focus of this dissertation is to examine whether the program's design features, contextualized tasks, collaborative decision-making, iterative reflection, data integration, and developmentally responsive practice function as intended levers for transformational learning, or whether they sometimes lose traction amid habit and routine. In doing so, the study establishes a clear rationale for exploring how these

design choices influence adult development and transformational leadership, as outlined in the following section.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to analyze how course design in the EdD International cohort program shapes the conditions for adult development, persistence, and transformational leadership practice. Universities face growing pressure to increase enrollment and retention, while adult learners seek programs that balance rigor with feasibility alongside demanding professional lives. Online doctoral programs, however, continue to report lower completion rates than their on-campus counterparts (Bawa, 2016; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016). One contributing factor is that many online programs are not designed with adult development in mind; instead, they are constructed piecemeal, course by course, lacking coherence and continuity (Kumar & Dawson, 2021; Snyder, 2019).

This challenge intersects with systemic inequities in higher education. Policies and resource allocations often privilege traditional, full-time undergraduates (Espinoza, 2007; Patton, 2016). Adult learners in professional doctorates, by contrast, bring substantial professional expertise but limited time, requiring programs that embed opportunities for reflection, equity inquiry, and developmental growth into the coursework itself (Knowles, 2015; Kegan, 1994; Drago-Severson, 2009).

My broader interest in this topic began with online education at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Across these contexts, I noticed a recurring mismatch between what adult learners need and how institutions structure online coursework. Initially, I imagined studying this phenomenon wherever I could find a compelling example. The International EdD became my focus not because it was the only possible site, but because it offered two unique advantages: I

had long worked alongside the program and could study it closely, and it consistently stood out as an online program that seemed to avoid the transactional pitfalls I had observed elsewhere. I might have chosen differently if I had encountered a similar undergraduate example. In this sense, the International EdD provided both a practical research opportunity and a powerful case to investigate how online course design can foster belonging, developmental growth, and leadership that advances fairness and access.

Within this context, the International EdD represents a distinctive case: a relatively new program that intentionally integrates developmentally responsive design, reflection, leadership identity, and participatory action research. Its off-model structure and global reach create opportunities and pressures, making it an especially rich site for study.

Over the years of involvement with the program, I have observed that when coursework anchors tasks in a local context, it invites collaborative judgment, fosters iterative reflection, incorporates data inquiry, and centers on fairness. It moves beyond busy work and reshapes how leaders practice. Whether these aims are consistently realized is the central question of this dissertation. Accordingly, this study investigates whether and how the program's learning environment and course-embedded opportunities fulfill their promise of transformational design and what implications emerge for leadership practice.

Significance of the Study

This study matters for students. Online education at both the undergraduate and graduate levels has opened access to learners who might otherwise be excluded due to geographical constraints, work commitments, or family responsibilities. However, access alone is not enough. Too often, the design of online courses prioritizes efficiency and delivery over developmental growth. Undergraduate students face disengagement and lower persistence rates; graduate

students risk experiencing programs as a sequence of assignments rather than opportunities for reflection, personal growth, and transformation. For each group, the course itself must carry the weight of development. This study examines whether intentional course design can fulfill that promise for adult learners.

This study matters for scholarship. While research on undergraduate student development has long emphasized the potential for transformation through campus-based experiences, less attention has been paid to how online programs, especially professional doctorates, can serve as vehicles for adult development. By examining how course-embedded practices function as mechanisms of growth, this study contributes to the literature on adult development, transformative learning, and double-loop learning. It reframes course design as the site where transformation occurs, not as an optional supplement.

This study matters for practice. Universities are under increasing pressure to enroll and retain students across all levels of study. At the same time, higher education faces a broader challenge: declining enrollments and growing skepticism about the value of a college degree. In this climate, programs that demonstrate rigor and relevance are crucial for rebuilding trust in higher education and demonstrating that advanced study can yield meaningful personal, professional, and social outcomes. The findings from this research can inform how institutions design online programs that are rigorous yet doable for learners, balancing professional and personal responsibilities. Embedding transformation directly into assignments and program structures, rather than layering on additional requirements, creates pathways for persistence and timely completion while honoring the real-world constraints of adult learners.

This study matters because it examines how leadership preparation can be designed to cultivate ethical awareness and developmental complexity. Treating ethical and contextual

analysis as a central design feature rather than an add-on helps prepare leaders who act with integrity and systemic understanding. In this way, ethical reflection functions as a centripetal force, propelling leaders outward toward responsible organizational and social action. While this inquiry cannot claim causal outcomes, it demonstrates how deliberately structured coursework creates conditions for principled and developmentally responsive leadership. It illustrates that rigor and responsibility are inseparable in doctoral preparation. This leadership study matters for ECU. The International EdD is part of ECU's growing national reputation for online education and its distinctive Off-Model programs. Examining how this program has thrived, this study offers a model for how institutions can rethink student success as the adult learner population continues to grow. It encompasses aspects such as enrollment, persistence, completion, and leadership development. The insights gained can help ECU and other universities better organize online education at both undergraduate and graduate levels to meet the diverse needs of adult learners.

Finally, this study matters for the field of practice-focused research. As a Dissertation in Practice, it demonstrates how inquiry can generate design knowledge that bridges scholarship and improvement. As the findings will later show, intentional course design operates through two interrelated moves: (a) designing opportunities for belonging, trust, and adult development, and (b) positioning equity as praxis that moves learning from liminality to systemic change. Together, these design moves illustrate how online doctoral education can shift from transactional routines to transformational experiences. When programs normalize liminality as an ongoing state of learning, they cultivate leaders who can better navigate institutional isomorphism, questioning entrenched norms rather than replicating them. By equipping students with both the capacity (knowledge, skills, and motivation) and the practice (protocols, feedback

structures, and reflection), doctoral education can create the conditions for sustained, ethical, and developmentally responsive transformational leadership.

Research Questions

To investigate whether the International EdD delivers on its transformational aims, this study is guided by three research questions. The questions progress from environment to opportunity to impact, mirroring the program's design and the study's findings.

RQ1. How does the program's learning environment, characterized by its focus on local context, collaborative decision making, and reflective practice, shape the transformational development of educational leaders?

RQ2. In what ways do the opportunities provided by the program, such as iterative reflection and data-driven decision making, contribute to adult development and transformative leadership practices among participants?

RQ3. How do participants interpret and describe the program's attention to equity, inclusive practices, and critical engagement with institutional norms as influencing their leadership and organizational improvement approaches? Together, these questions frame a coherent inquiry into how intentional course design can shift doctoral education from transactional routines toward transformational experiences that promote persistence, completion, and developmentally focused leadership. In doing so, the study examines how program design wove together identity-honoring assignments (such as autobiographies, mandalas, and digital stories) and ethically grounded, developmentally responsive inquiries, balancing anchoring forces of belonging and adult development with activating practices of ethical reflection and systemic improvement**.**

Theoretical And Conceptual Framework

Several complementary perspectives inform this study. Transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997) emphasizes how adults may experience perspective shifts through reflection and dialogue. Adult development (Kegan, 1994; Drago-Severson, 2009) emphasizes how leaders evolve toward more complex meaning-making when they are simultaneously supported and challenged. Knowles' (2015) theory of andragogy underscores that adults bring prior experience, value self-direction, and expect relevance. Double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Schön, 1983) clarifies how leaders move beyond incremental adjustments to established routines (single-loop learning) toward questioning and revising the underlying assumptions and values that guide their practice. Finally, the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison et al., 2000) and transactional distance theory (Moore, 1993) remind us that online learning depends on purposeful interaction and presence.

Together, these perspectives suggest that thoughtful course design can activate mechanisms such as reflection, equity inquiry, collaboration, and critical questioning that support transformational outcomes. For example, Mezirow's notion of perspective transformation is reflected when candidates revisit assumptions about equity during data analysis assignments. Kegan's developmental theory becomes visible when students describe how collaborative decision-making in cohort projects stretched their thinking and challenged them to integrate multiple viewpoints. Knowles' andragogy is evident when coursework allows candidates to connect tasks directly to their professional context, emphasizing self-direction and relevance. Argyris and Schön's double-loop learning is activated when coursework prompts candidates to solve immediate problems and interrogate the equity assumptions or organizational norms that structure those problems. The Community of Inquiry framework is applied when online

discussions strike a balance between social presence and cognitive challenge, and transactional distance is reduced through iterative feedback cycles that close the gap between faculty intentions and student experiences.

In addition, this study is informed by community-based and equity-focused frameworks. The Community Learning Exchange (CLE) axioms (Guajardo et al., 2016) emphasize that the people closest to a challenge are best positioned to address it, framing learning as relational, dialogic, and rooted in local wisdom. Relatedly, liberatory design and critical equity perspectives (hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Patton, 2016) position equity as both a stance and an action, inseparable from rigorous doctoral preparation. These frameworks, elaborated more fully in Chapter 2, provide essential grounding for interpreting how equity praxis became a developmental force in this study.

This overview serves as a primer to the fuller discussion in Chapter 2. The literature review provides a deeper examination of these frameworks, highlighting their intersections and applications in studies of adult learning, online doctoral education, and equity-oriented program design.

Key Terms

This study is grounded in two intertwined commitments that define the International Cohort Ed.D. in Educational Leadership (Off-Model). First, the program represents a reimagined design for doctoral study, tailored to working educators and structured to be completed in three years without sacrificing rigor. Second, the program aims not only to support timely completion but also to transform graduates' future practice by equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to maintain an inquiry stance throughout their professional lives.

Table 1 summarizes key terms to clarify the conceptual anchors of this study and the distinctive elements of the program under investigation. It integrates theoretical constructions (e.g., transformative learning, adult development, double-loop learning) with program-specific features (e.g., Community Learning Exchanges, self-as-leader, co-practitioner researchers, writing support). Together, these terms highlight the elements essential in moving online doctoral education from transactional routines to transformational experiences. These key terms represent more than abstract concepts; they define the mechanisms by which the International EdD seeks to deliver on its promise of both completion and transformation. By embedding constructs such as transformative learning, adult development, and double-loop learning into the curriculum and layering them with practices like Community Learning Exchanges, the Self as Leader emphasis, and structured writing support, the program positions course design itself as the lever for change.

Assumptions and Theory of Action

This study assumes that participants' reflections were sufficiently candid to capture evidence of transformation, while recognizing that self-presentation may have influenced their responses. It assumes that design features outlined in program documents were enacted in coursework. It also assumes that signs of transformational learning can be identified in language, artifacts, and accounts of practice, even if such signs appear unevenly across participants. Figure 1 illustrates the program's theory of action, highlighting how course design features were intended to foster adult development and transformational leadership.

Table 1

Key Terms and Their Application in the International EdD Program

Term and Anchor Citation(s)	Definition and Relevance to the Program
Transformative learning Mezirow (1997); Brookfield (2012); Dirkx (2006)	Examining assumptions, experiencing perspective shifts, and developing complex meaning-making. Within the International EdD, these processes are embedded in assignments such as data analyses and reflective memos that prompt candidates to reconsider their frames of reference and enact leadership transformation.
Adult development Kegan (1994); Drago-Severson (2009)	Growth in cognitive, relational, and intrapersonal capacities is supported by both challenge and support. The cohort model and leadership projects are intentionally designed to stretch meaning-making while sustaining belonging and trust.
Andragogy Knowles (2015)	Adults bring prior experience, value self-direction, and expect relevance—the program grounds coursework in participants' local contexts and professional problems of practice.
Double-loop learning Argyris and Schön (1978)	Moves beyond simple error correction to question underlying assumptions and values. Coursework emphasizes deeper reflection, prompting students to examine systemic norms rather than merely solving immediate problems critically.
Community of Inquiry (CoI) Garrison et al. (2000)	Meaningful online learning arises from the interaction of social, cognitive, and teaching presence—faculty presence, peer collaboration, and reflective dialogue foster engagement and a sense of community.
Transactional distance Moore (1993)	The psychological and communication gap in online learning varies by dialogue, structure, and autonomy. The program minimizes distance through iterative feedback, synchronous WebExchanges, and integrated syllabi that sustain connection.
Equity as rigor hooks (1994); Ladson-Billings (2006); Patton (2016)	Positions equity analysis as integral—not optional—to doctoral-level rigor. Assignments and residencies frame equity as both scholarly expectation and moral stance, functioning as a centripetal force propelling leaders toward systemic change.

Table 1 (continued)

Term and Anchor Citation(s)	Definition and Relevance to the Program
Community Learning Exchange (CLE) Guajardo et al. (2016)	Learning rooted in relationships, storytelling, and local wisdom, guided by axioms of dialogue and reciprocity. The Summer CLE residency in Thailand and course integration of CLE protocols enact these principles in practice.
Self as Leader Guajardo et al. (2016); Drago-Severson (2009)	Understanding self is foundational for leading others. Early program activities—Mandala, "I Am From" poem, and digital story—build self-awareness and cohort trust as preconditions for authentic leadership.
Ethically Responsive Inquiry Freire (1970); Brookfield (2005); Mezirow (1991); Drago-Severson (2009)	Integrates reflection, context analysis, and action as a cycle of professional learning. Grounded in theories of praxis and adult development, it links moral reasoning with evidence-based improvement. Within the International EdD, it informs assignments that engage candidates in examining context, consequence, and leadership practice through an ethical lens.
Co-Practitioner Researchers (CPRs) Militello et al. (2022)	Individuals who act simultaneously as practitioners and researchers in participatory action projects. Students, faculty, and peers collaborate as inquiry partners in designing and executing PAR dissertations.
Focus of Practice (FoP) Ryan and Watson (2021)	Reframes the traditional problem of practice as a site for improvement and transformation rather than deficit framing. The International EdD adopts this term to align inquiry with equity-driven leadership.
Writing support and dissertation coaching Kumar & Dawson (2021); Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2016)	Iterative writing practice and personalized coaching are embedded across coursework. Each student works with a dissertation coach for feedback and sustained scholarly growth.

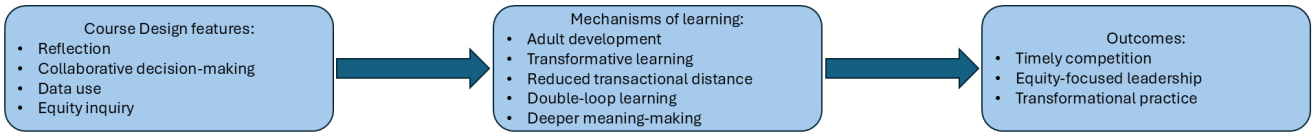


Figure 1. Theory of action for the International EdD.

This study assumes that transformation emerges not from isolated assignments but from the program's developmental arc. The program's design positions coursework as the catalyst for adult development, beginning with self-reflection, extending into community trust and collaboration, and culminating in developmentally responsive practice. This intentional sequencing, reflection, collaborative inquiry, contextual application, and contextual analysis move learning from transactional routines toward transformational learning outcomes. The dual dynamics of the program—centrifugal forces of belonging and trust that hold students in community, and centripetal forces of equity praxis that propel them outward into systemic change—frame how the International EdD seeks to move candidates beyond compliance toward genuine transformation.

Limitations

This qualitative study is bound to the ECU International EdD program and data collected during the 2024 academic year. It focuses on two cohorts: Cohort 4 (n = 8, who completed the program) and Cohort 5 (n = 12, who entered the program). The findings are not intended to be statistically generalized, but rather to provide insights that may resonate with comparable programs.

Methodological limitations

The study relies on interviews, observations, and document review, all of which depend on participants' openness and my interpretations. Social desirability may have influenced responses, and course artifacts may reflect performance more than deep belief. Triangulation across data sources and reflexive memoing helped mitigate these concerns, although they cannot eliminate them. Program faculty and instructional designers contributed as sounding boards to help clarify purposes and assignments, but their involvement was limited to context and setting,

rather than co-analysis. Students contributed through their data interviews, artifacts, and documents, but were not positioned as co-researchers. Their voices are preserved primarily through quotations and descriptive accounts.

Researcher Positionality

As Coordinator for Off-Model Credit Programs at ECU, I occupy a dual role that informs and complicates this study. My professional responsibilities include providing administrative and programmatic support to Off-Model initiatives, including the International EdD. This proximity gives me unique insight into program operations and raises important questions about positionality and power. I secured Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to address these risks, ensured confidentiality, and engaged in reflexive practices to monitor assumptions. I remain mindful of the inherent power dynamics involved in studying a program where I play a professional role. I aim to strike a balance between insider knowledge and a commitment to the equitable representation of participants' voices.

Inquiry Partners

Inquiry partners in this study included program faculty and instructional designers, who served as sounding boards to clarify the purposes of assignments and confirm how course design choices were intended to function. Their insights helped ensure my interpretations of program structures aligned with faculty intentions and design rationales.

Students were central to the study as participants, but they were not positioned as co-researchers. Instead, their perspectives were represented through interview data, course documents, artifacts, and observations. In writing, I sought to preserve their voices by incorporating direct quotations and descriptive accounts wherever possible. This approach

foregrounded the experiences of students while maintaining appropriate boundaries between researchers and participants.

Overview of Research Design

This qualitative dissertation employed a single bounded case study to examine how the International EdD enacts transformational course design in practice. The case was bounded by time, place, participants, and activity: the June 2024 Summer Learning Exchange (SLE) in Bangkok, Thailand, where Cohorts 4 and 5 engaged in course-embedded routines intended to cultivate belonging, adult development, and developmentally responsive practice.

To understand how the program's learning environment operated across settings, I observed both the in-person residency and a series of virtual WebExchange sessions conducted before and during the academic year. Data sources also included semi-structured interviews, reflective memos, course and SLE syllabi, program documents, and student artifacts such as autobiographies, stance images, and equity inventories. Triangulation across these sources, along with analytic memoing and a maintained audit trail, strengthened the study's credibility and trustworthiness.

All procedures were reviewed and approved by East Carolina University's University and Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB Protocol 23-002481, Exempt). Documentation of IRB approval appears in Appendix A, and the participant consent form is provided in Appendix B. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect confidentiality.

This overview situates the reader within the study's design; Chapter 4 provides a comprehensive methodological account, including the instruments, analytical approach, and rigor strategies.

Summary

This chapter laid the groundwork for the study by introducing the program context, clarifying the focus of practice, and identifying the purpose, significance, research questions, theoretical framework, and key terms. Assumptions, scope, limitations, inquiry partners, and an overview of the research design were also outlined to frame the inquiry. As summarized in the theory of action (Figure 1), the International EdD is designed to activate developmental and transformational processes through an intentional arc from self-reflection to community trust and collaboration, ultimately leading to developmentally responsive practice that positions course design as a catalyst for leadership growth.

Returning to the central concern that online adult learners too often encounter transactional coursework rather than transformational experiences, this study positions intentional course design as the decisive factor shaping persistence, completion, and leadership development. Ultimately, the study yielded two overarching findings: (a) designing opportunities for belonging, trust, and adult development, and (b) positioning equity as praxis moving from liminality to systemic change. These findings are elaborated in Chapter 5.

The chapters that follow build on this foundation. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on graduate education, online learning design, adult development, and transformative learning. Chapter 3 provides an extended description of the International EdD program, offering a fuller context for understanding how its design features create a bounded case. Chapter 4 expands on the methodological overview introduced here, detailing the research design and analytic procedures. Chapter 5 presents the study's findings, accompanied by warrants for the claims. Chapter 6 integrates these findings with the literature to propose implications and a new framework for reimagining online doctoral programs.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The focus of practice in this study is how course design in Doctor of Education (EdD) International Cohort (Off-Model) in Educational Leadership at East Carolina University (ECU) can move beyond transactional routines to support transformational learning and adult development for online doctoral learners. Chapter 1 introduced this concern by contrasting undergraduate, residential models of student development with the realities of mid-career professionals with limited bandwidth for "extras." This chapter reviews the scholarship that frames this study and specifies how it informs later analysis.

The review is organized around three interrelated literature bins, with course design positioned at the center:

- **Transformative adult learning and development** – how adults critically examine assumptions and grow through increasingly complex ways of making meaning, supported by scaffolds such as reflection, dialogue, belonging, and trust.
- **Online learning frameworks** – theories of presence, dialogue, and structure in virtual environments, including transactional distance and the Community of Inquiry (CoI), which highlight conditions that foster engagement and reduce isolation.
- **Equity as rigor and praxis** – the stance that equity is integral to rigor, informed by culturally responsive leadership, equity praxis in liminal spaces, the Community Learning Exchange (CLE) axioms, participatory action research approaches, and CPED design principles for the professional doctorate.

Taken together, these bins frame how course design can either reproduce transactional routines or cultivate transformational growth. Figure 2 illustrates this conceptual organization, with course design at the center, integrating the contributions of all three bins.

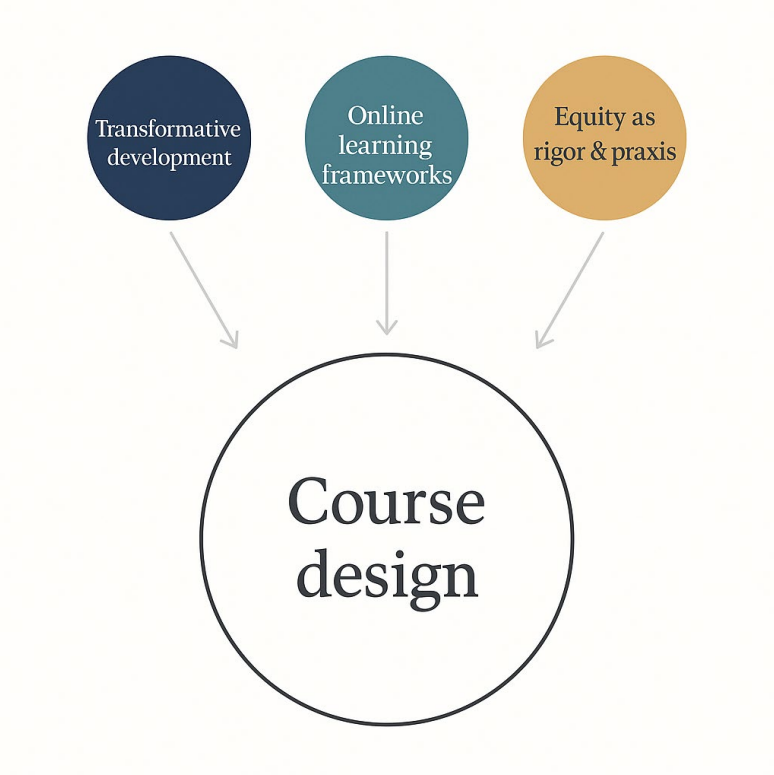


Figure 2. Conceptual organization of Chapter 2.

As shown in Figure 2, this review positions course design as the organizing hub informed by three domains. We begin with transformative adult development, which explains how adults make meaning through reflection, dialogue, and identity work within liminal spaces, mechanisms that anchor belonging and trust, and later surface as "anchoring forces" in Chapters 5 and 6.

Transformative Adult Learning and Development

Transformative adult development provides the study's developmental logic: adults learn by examining and revising meaning perspectives through structured reflection, dialogic interaction, and identity work within liminal spaces. This section proceeds in three moves: (a) it situates core frameworks in adult and transformative learning, (b) it translates those frameworks into design moves that the International EdD intentionally builds into routine practice, and (c) it previews how these processes later operate as anchoring forces in the findings (Ch. 5) and interpretation (Ch. 6). In the context of the International EdD, these processes are intentionally designed into routines that cultivate belonging and trust while challenging assumptions in service of leadership growth (Mezirow, 2000; Kegan, 1994; Drago-Severson, 2009; Brookfield, 2012). As later reported in Chapter 5 and interpreted in Chapter 6, these design features anchor learners in a sense of belonging and trust, even as they cultivate the adaptive capacity required for transformational leadership and systemic change.

Adult Development

Traditional student development theories (e.g., Chickering, 1969; Perry, 1970) have been foundational for understanding undergraduate growth, but they presume residential, full-time, late-adolescent learners. By contrast, adult learners in professional doctorates are typically mid-career professionals balancing work, family, and study, and they bring substantial prior expertise. Accordingly, adult development frameworks such as Kegan (1994) and Drago-Severson (2009)

are better suited to examine how doctoral coursework supports growth. This distinction explains why the present study privileges adult development over traditional student development models.

Within this tradition, two complementary perspectives are especially relevant to this study. Kegan (1994) described adult development as the evolution from external reliance to self-authorship, where individuals generate and evaluate their own frameworks rather than relying solely on external authorities. Drago-Severson (2009) extended this work to educational leadership, identifying practices such as teaming, collegial inquiry, structured opportunities for reflection, and mentoring as scaffolds that can support adult development in professional contexts. These supports enable learners to hold multiple perspectives, embrace complexity, and navigate contradiction, capacities essential for educational leaders.

Empirical studies confirm the relevance of these frameworks. Pizzolato (2003) showed that assignments requiring integration of data analysis with personal and professional perspectives pushed learners toward higher levels of meaning-making. Tisdell and Tolliver (2019) documented how structured peer collaboration supported doctoral students' development of self-authorship. Stevens-Long et al. (2012) further demonstrated how doctoral study environments can integrate adult development and transformative learning to foster growth, emphasizing that course-embedded supports are not ancillary but central to professional learning. In addition to support and challenge, adult learners benefit when they perceive that their presence in a program matters. Tinto's (1987, 1997) theory of student persistence emphasizes not only academic and social integration but also the sense that one is noticed, valued, and consequential to the learning community. More recent work extends this concept of mattering to adult learners, underscoring that persistence is sustained when learners feel both connected and significant (Ashar & Skenes, 1993; Guiffrida, 2006; Lin et al., 2022). Within developmental frameworks,

mattering complements belonging by signaling that adults' prior expertise and current contributions are recognized as essential to collective growth. Without this recognition, belonging may feel superficial; with it, learners are more likely to remain engaged in the difficult, liminal work of transformation. Building on these adult development traditions, the next subsection turns to transformative learning, which specifies how meaning perspectives are revised through structured reflection and dialogue.

Transformative Learning

Building on the adult development tradition, *transformative learning explains how* meaning perspectives are revised. Mezirow (2000) outlined ten phases that often accompany transformation, beginning with a disorienting dilemma and culminating in reintegrating a new perspective. Although learners do not necessarily proceed linearly, the model highlights the potential for profound change when assumptions are confronted through reflective dialogue. These dynamics map onto liminality—the in-between state where prior assumptions loosen before new perspectives consolidate. Navigating such threshold states is uncomfortable yet generative, creating conditions for reflection, experimentation, and growth (Dirkx, 2006; Taylor, 2007).

In doctoral education, course design can intentionally embed these features: reflection prompts, peer dialogue, and applied projects that require candidates to reframe their practice. Cranton and King (2003) and Henderson et al. (2020) found that structured opportunities for critical reflection in higher education fostered transformational outcomes, while Taylor (2007) highlighted the importance of dialogue for supporting perspective shifts. At the same time, critiques of transformative learning remind us that the theory often privileges rational discourse over emotional, embodied, or cultural dimensions of transformation (Brookfield, 2012; Dirkx,

2006). These critiques are especially salient in diverse and international doctoral cohorts, where assumptions about what counts as "critical reflection" may vary significantly. Because doctoral leadership development unfolds within organizations, the discussion expands from individual meaning-making to organizational and leadership learning, where reflection becomes collective inquiry and practice revision.

Organizational and Leadership Learning

Theories of organizational learning extend the focus from individual meaning-making to collective growth. Argyris and Schön (1978, 1996) distinguished between single-loop and double-loop learning: single-loop learning involves detecting and correcting errors within established routines, while double-loop learning involves questioning and revising the underlying values, norms, or goals that guide action. Double-loop learning resonates with doctoral education, where candidates are expected not only to master existing frameworks but to interrogate and reframe them in light of equity, context, and practice. This reflective pause between error-detection and reframing can be understood as a liminal state that requires leaders to sit with uncertainty before generating adaptive responses (Argyris, 1991).

Heifetz and Linsky (2002) offered the "balcony" metaphor to distinguish between technical, transactional problem solving and adaptive, transformational leadership. On the "dance floor," leaders are immersed in day-to-day activity, focused on immediate tasks and short-term solutions, whereas moving to the "balcony" allows them to step back, observe systemic patterns, and diagnose the underlying norms and values that shape behavior (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002, pp. 51–53). This balcony perspective parallels Argyris and Schön's notion of double-loop learning. Heifetz and Linsky also emphasized that adaptive leadership requires holding steady amid the heat and orchestrating conflict, creating conditions where divergent

values can be surfaced productively. Together, these metaphors highlight the developmental nature of leadership: effective leaders must be able to remain in liminal spaces of disequilibrium, using those in-between moments to generate new perspectives and practices.

Empirical studies of leadership practice reinforce the importance of this distinction. Hallinger (1992) traced the evolution of American principals from managerial to instructional to transformational roles, highlighting how broader system-level thinking emerged as expectations for leadership shifted. Similarly, Leithwood and Steinbach (1991) identified indicators of transformational leadership in how school administrators approached complex problem solving, noting the importance of reflection and adaptive reasoning. Shields (2004) extended this conversation through the lens of dialogic leadership for social justice, arguing that transformational practice requires leaders to create spaces where inequities can be named and addressed through dialogue rather than silence. These perspectives converge in the design of professional doctorates; the following studies illustrate how programs operationalize these ideas through course-embedded routines.

Empirical Applications in Doctoral Programs

Recent studies demonstrate how these developmental and transformational theories are enacted in professional doctorates. Ross-Gordon et al. (2015) examined an innovative doctoral program that used community-based approaches and structured critical reflection to foster transformative learning. Provident et al. (2015) found that active learning, cohort models, and reflective assignments promoted transformative growth in online clinical doctoral programs. Marotta (2024) identified evidence of transformative learning among EdD students enrolled during the pandemic, emphasizing the importance of teaching presence in guiding reflection and critical dialogue in virtual settings. McCall et al. (2023) demonstrated that project-based learning

in EdD instructional design courses supported knowledge acquisition and professional application. DeMartino and Renn (2023) described how research methods courses grounded in adult learning theory scaffolded developmental growth.

Other research underscores the role of community and belonging as conditions for adult transformation. Angay-Crowder and Rohloff (2021) found that leadership development in doctoral programs was strengthened through student organizations that provided relational and reflective spaces for growth. Lambrev and Cruz (2021) highlighted how community-building strategies in online professional doctorates, framed through the Community of Inquiry model, supported engagement and students' willingness to risk perspective change. Rost and Krahenbuhl (2023) extended this conversation by showing that belonging is not simply desirable but decisive for persistence in online EdD programs, finding that a strong sense of belonging reduced imposter syndrome and improved dissertation completion rates. These findings reinforce the broader argument that adult development and transformative learning are not only cognitive but also relational, relying on trust and belonging as scaffolds for adaptive growth.

Bin 1 Summary

Bin 1 establishes that adult development and transformative learning theories offer powerful frameworks for understanding how doctoral students grow through course-embedded opportunities. Seminal theories highlight the developmental arc of meaning-making, while adaptive leadership metaphors and double-loop learning emphasize transformational growth's reflective and systemic dimensions. Across these perspectives, liminality emerges as a unifying construct: the threshold states of disequilibrium, disorientation, and uncertainty that learners must navigate in order to reconstruct meaning. Belonging and mattering emerge as necessary conditions for transformation, particularly in online EdD programs. These insights underscore

that course design is not incidental but central: it can either confine learners to transactional routines or equip them to engage in transformational practice. Having established the developmental 'why,' Bin 2 addresses the online design 'how' of the specific frameworks (e.g., Community of Inquiry, transactional distance) that translate these developmental aims into day-to-day course structures.

Online Learning Frameworks

Online learning frameworks build on these developmental insights by specifying how design choices structure interaction in virtual environments. As professional doctorates increasingly rely on online and hybrid formats, drawing on theories explaining how dialogue, presence, and structure shape engagement is essential. Two widely cited models, transactional distance and the Community of Inquiry (CoI), provide complementary lenses for designing courses that reduce isolation and support purposeful interaction (Moore, 1993; Garrison, et al., 2000). These frameworks also benefit from equity-centered extensions to ensure online spaces are not only engaging but also just and inclusive. First, transactional distance theory highlights how structure, dialogue, and learner autonomy interact to close psychological distance in online settings (Moore, 1993). Complementing this, the CoI framework articulates teaching, social, and cognitive presence as mutually reinforcing conditions for deep learning (Garrison et al., 2000).

Transactional Distance

Michael Moore's (1993) theory of transactional distance reconceptualizes distance in education not as physical separation but as a psychological and communication gap between teacher and learner. He argued that this gap is mediated by three interrelated variables: dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy. Programs with high dialogue and flexible structure tend to reduce transactional distance, while rigid structure and low dialogue increase it. This framework

remains foundational for evaluating the quality of online learning environments in professional education.

Shearer (2009) emphasized that the quality of dialogue matters more than its frequency: asynchronous discussions reduce distance when meaningfully facilitated but reinforce transactional patterns when treated as checklist tasks. Gorsky and Caspi (2005) showed that poorly designed dialogue activities rarely reduce distance, underscoring that course design must intentionally foster authentic interaction. More recently, Cho and Cho (2017) found that guided peer dialogue significantly reduced perceived distance among EdD students. Lowenthal and Moore (2020) highlighted teaching presence as critical for balancing autonomy with support. Together, these findings show that transactional distance can be managed through deliberate design choices, yet poorly designed structures risk reproducing the transactional patterns doctoral students resist.

Community of Inquiry (CoI)

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison et al., 2000) describes the intentional learning community formed among students and instructors in online environments. Within the International EdD, this community is cultivated through cohort structures, asynchronous collaboration, and synchronous WebExchange sessions that simulate the dialogic engagement of face-to-face learning. The framework posits that meaningful online learning arises from the interplay of three interdependent elements: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. Social presence concerns learners' ability to project themselves authentically within the cohort community; cognitive presence involves sustained inquiry and meaning making; and teaching presence encompasses the design, facilitation, and guidance that shape learner engagement.

Anderson et al. (2001) and Swan and Shih (2005) demonstrated that these presences are mutually reinforcing: social presence fosters trust, cognitive presence supports inquiry, and teaching presence structures discourse and feedback. Recent studies affirm CoI's relevance in doctoral education. Martin et al. (2022) found that intentional scaffolding of teaching presence enhanced satisfaction and critical reflection in an online EdD program. Archibald et al. (2019) showed that CoI principles adapted to hybrid formats promoted collaborative inquiry. Lambrev and Cruz (2021) linked CoI to belonging and engagement, showing that students were more likely to risk perspective change when social presence and trust were intentionally cultivated. Together, these studies affirm CoI as a useful lens for understanding how online doctoral coursework can scaffold reflection, dialogue, and collaborative meaning making within a cohesive virtual learning community.

Extending CoI with Equity Frameworks

While foundational, CoI and transactional distance frameworks are necessary but not sufficient for explaining transformational learning in online professional doctorates. Critics note that these models can underplay cultural, relational, and equity considerations (Hernandez, 2019). Without explicit attention to justice and inclusion, online environments may replicate marginalization even when "presence" and "dialogue" boxes are checked. Scholars also caution that CoI can privilege rational–cognitive processes over emotional, embodied, and imaginative dimensions essential to adult development. Dirkx (2006) reminds us that transformation requires attention to affect and emotion; online spaces must nurture relational and affective presence, not only cognitive engagement.

To address these limitations, equity-centered and relational frameworks such as the Community Learning Exchange (CLE) axioms and the Ecologies of Knowing (Guajardo et al.,

2016) offer an expanded lens. These frameworks emphasize that learning and leadership are social, contextual, and rooted in community relationships, reframing presence as both cognitive and ethical. They point toward online designs that foreground trust, vulnerability, and reciprocity as conditions for growth. The following bin, Equity as Rigor and Praxis, develops these concepts in greater depth, examining how the CLE axioms and ecologies function as a relational design frame for equity-driven doctoral learning.

Empirical Applications in Doctoral Programs

Several studies have examined how online learning frameworks operate specifically in EdD and other professional doctorate contexts. Kumar and Dawson (2021, 2022) found that course structures directly influenced whether students experienced programs as transactional or transformative, noting particular challenges around scalability and faculty workload when programs attempted to maintain high levels of teaching presence. Preston, Wiebe, and McAuley (2020) documented how inquiry-based coursework in EdD programs fostered shifts in practice, reinforcing that authentic dialogue and collaborative inquiry mirror the conditions proposed in CoI. Ross-Gordon et al. (2015) similarly showed that community-based structures supported engagement and meaning-making, providing doctoral students with relational scaffolds that reduced isolation. These studies highlight that online doctoral coursework can intentionally manage transactional distance and foster CoI when assignments are linked to practice, authentic dialogue, and teaching presence is sustained.

Bin 2 Summary

Bin 2 demonstrates that transactional distance and Community of Inquiry frameworks remain valuable for analyzing how dialogue, structure, and presence shape online learning in professional doctorates. Empirical studies confirm that authentic dialogue, teaching presence,

and scaffolded inquiry reduce isolation and promote engagement. Yet critiques underscore that these models risk remaining transactional unless integrated with equity-centered perspectives. Emerging frameworks such as the Community Learning Exchange (CLE) and Ecologies of Knowing (Guajardo et al., 2016) suggest how online design can move beyond cognitive and structural dimensions to emphasize trust, belonging, and relational engagement. These ideas are explored more fully in Bin 3, which develops equity as the core of rigor and praxis in doctoral education.

Taken together, these insights confirm that online learning frameworks cannot be understood only as matters of structure and dialogue. In professional doctorates, where adult learners bring complex identities and professional commitments, course design must intentionally integrate presence, dialogue, equity, and trust. When these conditions are in place, online spaces can function as liminal zones where learners navigate uncertainty, confront assumptions, and reconstruct meaning. This expanded perspective ensures that online learning environments are both efficient and genuinely developmental and transformational. If Bin 1 explains how adults navigate liminal learning and Bin 2 specifies the online levers that support it, Bin 3 asserts the purpose: equity as rigor and praxis. This design stance orients learning toward action on inequity.

Equity as Rigor and Praxis

In professional-doctorate scholarship, equity as rigor and praxis is advanced as a theoretical stance that links academic excellence with ethical responsiveness. Rigor is reconceptualized as the disciplined analysis of context, power, and consequence, rather than the pursuit of neutrality or detachment (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Sleeter, 2012; Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate [CPED], 2019). Within this view, *equity* functions as a quality marker of scholarly depth: rigorous work is work that attends to fairness, responsiveness, and the conditions that shape learning opportunities (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Khalifa et al., 2016). Praxis, drawn from Freire (1970) and extended in adult-learning and leadership literature (Brookfield, 2005; Mezirow, 1991; Drago-Severson, 2009), denotes the iterative coupling of reflection and action through which professionals refine their understanding and practice. Recent CPED-aligned research (Militello et al., 2020) integrates these ideas, describing equity as a rigor and praxis as a design orientation for the EdD that combines disciplined inquiry with ethical, context-aware action in addressing authentic problems of practice.

Rigor Reframed: Equity as the Standard, not the Supplement

Equity in doctoral education is not optional; it defines rigor. hooks (1994) argued that education must be a practice of freedom, embedding equity as central to intellectual rigor rather than treating it as an add-on. Ladson-Billings (2006) similarly positioned culturally relevant pedagogy as both academically demanding and justice-oriented, reframing rigor through cultural responsiveness. Building on this foundation, Patton (2016) called for examining the structures of graduate education that perpetuate inequities, while Castro et al. (2019) advanced the concept of "equity by design," emphasizing that coursework and assessments must challenge deficit perspectives and promote success for historically marginalized students. Paris and Alim (2017)

further developed the concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy, which moves beyond relevance to actively sustain linguistic and cultural pluralism as a hallmark of rigorous learning. Gay (2018) highlighted how culturally responsive teaching practices can elevate equity and academic quality.

Evidence from Doctoral Contexts: What works in Practice

Recent empirical research underscores this stance. Bawa (2016) demonstrated that equity-oriented scaffolding improved retention and persistence among underrepresented students in online programs. McClure and Spanierman (2020) found that structured equity dialogues in doctoral leadership programs fostered both cognitive growth and professional practice change. Felten and Lambert (2020) highlighted how embedding inclusive pedagogy principles in graduate courses elevated both engagement and rigor. Rost and Krahenbuhl (2023) extended this argument by showing that cultivating belonging in online EdD programs directly reduced imposter syndrome and improved dissertation completion rates, underscoring equity as an ethical stance and a condition for success. Ryan and Watson (2021) examined ECU's International EdD as a case of leadership preparation that intentionally links reflection, context, and ethical responsiveness in its design—an approach they framed as *equity-focused* within the literature.

Leadership as Equity Praxis

Scholars of educational leadership further argue that equity praxis is enacted through culturally responsive and justice-focused leadership. In this view, instructional quality and equity are inseparable. Khalifa (2016) advanced the concept of culturally responsive school leadership, contending that effective leaders must develop equity stances that are integral to instructional rigor. Galloway and Ishimaru (2017) identified equitable leadership practices that converge around coaching, supervision, and creating inclusive learning environments. Grissom et al.

(2021) synthesized two decades of research to show that principals, as the second most important in-school factor after teachers, significantly shape equity outcomes by fostering culturally responsive and rigorous instruction. These studies reinforce that equity leadership is not incidental but a central determinant of academic quality and student outcomes. These findings parallel design moves in the International EdD, including structured equity dialogue, asset-based tasks, and teaching presence, as relational work.

CLE Axioms and Ecologies: A Relational Design Frame

According to Guajardo et al. (2016), the *Community Learning Exchange (CLE)* axioms articulate five relational commitments that embed equity as rigor and praxis in educational leadership. The axioms emphasize that leadership and learning are dynamic social processes; that conversations function as central pedagogies; that those closest to the issues are best positioned to address them; that crossing boundaries enriches development; and that hope builds on community assets and dreams. These commitments align with broader movements in equity-driven leadership, which position relationships and dialogue, not hierarchy, as the primary engines of improvement (Khalifa et al., 2016; Shields, 2018). Through this lens, equity is not an add-on to rigor, but its very expression: the disciplined practice of interrogating power, culture, and context to improve outcomes for those most affected by inequity.

Complementing the CLE axioms are the Ecologies of Knowing, which identify *where and through whom* learning and leadership occur within the self, the organization, and the community. These nested ecologies reveal that transformation is both personal and collective: individual reflection within the self, collaborative inquiry within organizations, and participatory action within communities. In combination, the axioms and ecologies form a dynamic system that links process and place—the *how* and the *where* of equitable learning.

This relational structure resonates strongly with theories of adult development and transformative learning. Scholars such as Kegan (1994) and Drago-Severson (2009) emphasize that adults grow through cycles of support and challenge, while Mezirow (1997) and Dirkx (2006) describe transformation as an iterative process of reflection, dialogue, and meaning-making. Similarly, the CLE model assumes that authentic learning requires communities of trust where vulnerability and reflection are possible—conditions akin to the *liminal spaces* that developmental theorists identify as essential for transformation (Kegan, 1994; Drago-Severson, 2009).

Figure 3 illustrates this dynamic relationship, showing how the five CLE axioms operate across the three Ecologies of Knowing to enact equity as rigor and praxis. The interaction among these frameworks positions learning as inherently relational, contextual, and justice-oriented, linking personal transformation with collective responsibility (hooks, 1994; Tisdell & Tolliver, 2019). Figure 3 depicts this interaction, illustrating how the five CLE axioms operate across the three Ecologies of Knowing to enact equity as rigor and praxis. The model highlights how transformation emerges through reciprocal relationships that connect personal reflection, organizational learning, and community engagement (hooks, 1994; Tisdell & Tolliver, 2019).

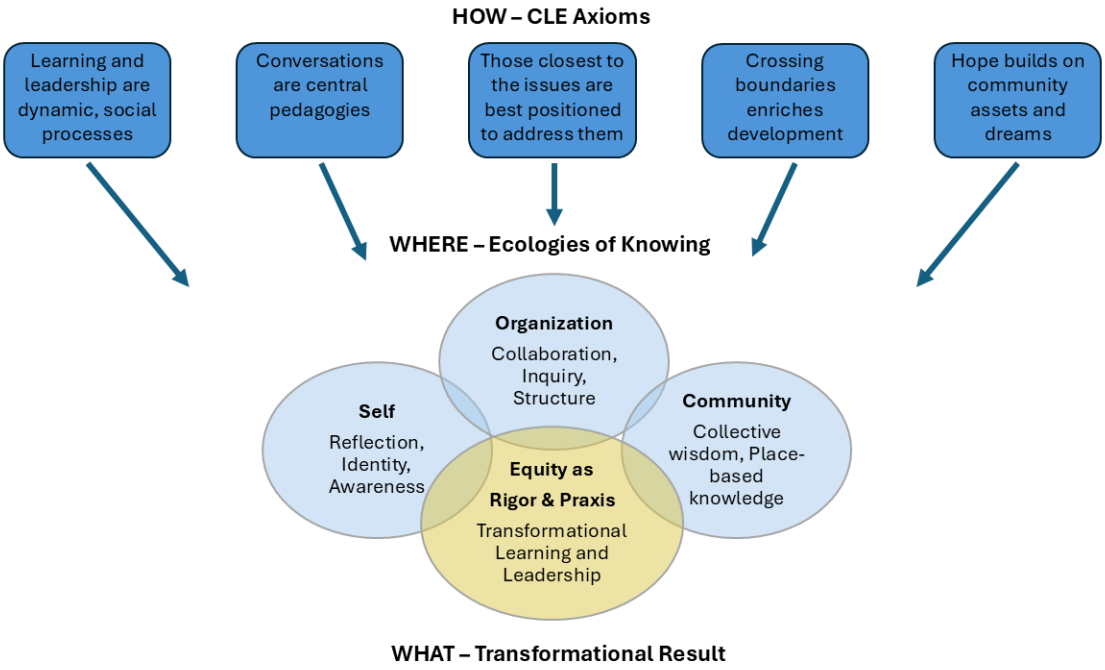


Figure 3. How, where, and what of CLE Axioms and Ecologies of Knowing.

The relational architecture illustrated in Figure 3 also provides the foundation for culturally responsive and equity-centered leadership practice. If the CLE axioms and Ecologies of Knowing describe how equitable learning unfolds, culturally responsive leadership shows what it looks like in action. Scholars such as Khalifa et al. (2016) and Ladson-Billings (2006) argue that leadership for equity begins with recognizing community wisdom, validating multiple ways of knowing, and disrupting deficit narratives. Within doctoral education, these commitments are reflected in course designs that foreground identity, storytelling, and dialogue as legitimate sources of theory and evidence.

Equity as rigor is also central to how professional doctorates are being reimagined nationally. The CPED network has been instrumental in reframing the EdD as a rigorous, practice-oriented degree grounded in inquiry and equity. Militello et al. (2022) documented how CPED design principles positioned equity as a lever for professional practice transformation when enacted in EdD programs. Subsequent analyses (Perry, 2022, 2023; Ryan & Watson, 2021) provide concrete evidence of how equity-focused design improves student outcomes by embedding inquiry cycles, collaborative problem-solving, and culturally responsive practices into coursework. Collectively, these studies confirm that equity is not merely a value statement but a design principle that defines rigor in the professional doctorate.

The International EdD exemplifies how CPED's design principles can be enacted in practice. In alignment with the national movement, ECU faculty reimagined the professional doctorate to integrate coursework, inquiry, and dissertation development within a single, coherent design. This structure reflects CPED's call to link theory and practice through authentic, ethically grounded and context-responsive focus of practice, sustaining rigor through continuous cycles of reflection and improvement (Militello et al., 2022; Perry, 2023). By

embedding collaboration, applied research, and systems thinking into every stage of study, the Off-Model EdD translates CPED's commitments into lived practice for working educators across global contexts. In this way, the program frames ethical responsiveness and developmental growth as guiding principles through which doctoral learning, professional inquiry, and leadership development occur

Finally, the participatory orientation of the International EdD also aligns closely with the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR), which extend both the epistemological stance of the CLE framework and the design commitments of CPED. Like CLE, PAR begins from the assumption that knowledge is co-created within relationships and communities, and that inquiry itself can be an act of equity and transformation (Fine, 2018; Guajardo et al., 2016). Consistent with CPED's call for *inquiry as practice*, PAR is used within the program as a guiding methodology for candidates' dissertations, emphasizing collaborative cycles of reflection, action, and improvement that position practitioner-scholars as co-researchers rather than subjects (Ryan & Watson, 2021). Although this dissertation does not employ PAR directly, the methodology is central to the International EdD's design. It illustrates how ethical reflection, inquiry, and action converge as defining logics of the program's approach to transformational learning.

Bin 3 Summary

Bin 3 underscores that equity is inseparable from rigor in doctoral education. Foundational theorists reframed rigor through equity and cultural responsiveness, and empirical studies confirm that equity-oriented scaffolding, dialogue, and pedagogy improve persistence and transformational outcomes. Leadership research highlights the decisive role of culturally responsive practice, showing that equity-focused leaders create inclusive environments that strengthen both academic quality and justice outcomes**.**

Collectively, Bins 1–3 reveal that transformational learning in professional doctorates requires integrating cognitive, affective, and cultural dimensions. Bin 1 emphasizes adult development and liminality; Bin 2 details online frameworks that structure presence and dialogue; and Bin 3 demonstrates how equity praxis reframes rigor. This synthesis situates course design as the decisive lever—one that fosters belonging, mattering, and equity while equipping leaders for transformational practice. To synthesize the three literature bins reviewed in this chapter, Table 2 summarizes their major theories, critiques, and implications for course design in professional doctoral programs.

Table 2

Summary of Core Literature Across Bins and Implications for Course Design

Literature bin	Core theories	Critiques and extensions	Empirical applications	Implications for course design
Bin 1: Transformative adult learning and development	Kegan's (1994) constructive-developmental theory; Drago-Severson's (2009) adult supports; Mezirow's (2000) transformative learning; Argyris & Schön's (1978) double-loop learning; Heifetz & Linsky's (2002) adaptive leadership	Overemphasis on rational discourse; need for affective and cultural dimensions (Dirkx, 2006; Brookfield, 2012)	Pizzolato (2003); Stevens-Long et al. (2012); Hoggan & Militello (2015); Marotta (2024)	Course design must scaffold liminal spaces with reflection, dialogue, and projects that foster belonging and mattering.
Bin 2: Online learning frameworks	Moore's (1993) transactional distance; Garrison et al.'s (2000) Community of Inquiry (CoI)	Risk of transactional checklists; limited attention to equity, culture, and emotion (Hernandez, 2019; Dirkx, 2006)	Cho & Cho (2017); Martin et al. (2022); Kumar & Dawson (2021, 2022); Preston et al. (2020)	Online design must integrate authentic dialogue, sustained teaching presence, and trust-building; extend CoI with CLE axioms.

Table 2 (continued)

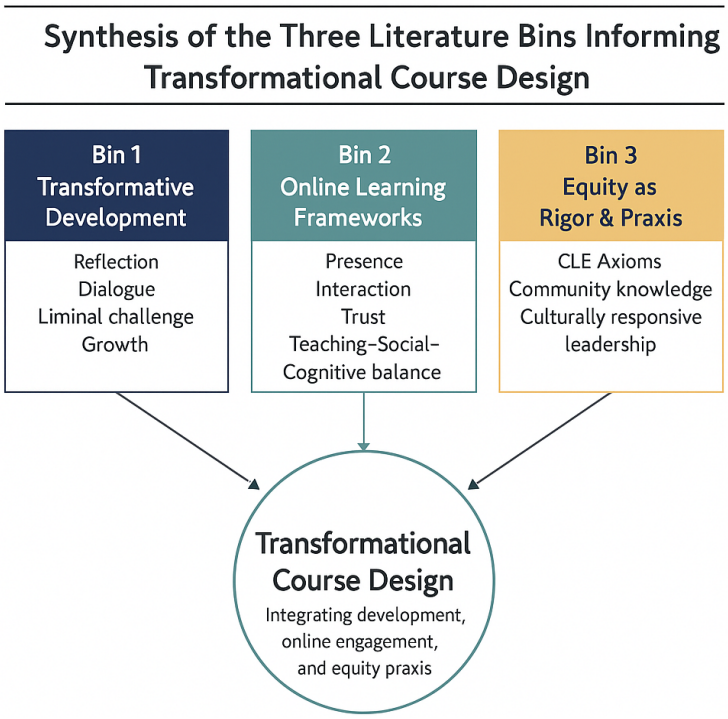
Literature bin	Core theories	Critiques and extensions	Empirical applications	Implications for course design
Bin 3: Equity as rigor and praxis	hooks (1994) education as freedom; Guajardo et al. (2016) Community Learning Exchange (CLE) axioms and Ecologies of Knowing; Ladson-Billings (2006) culturally relevant pedagogy; Paris & Alim (2017) culturally sustaining pedagogy; CPED design principles	Need to dismantle structures that reproduce inequity; challenge deficit views; embed inquiry cycles and relational praxis	Bawa (2016); McClure & Spanierman (2020); Rost & Krahenbuhl (2023); Ryan & Watson (2021); Militello et al. (2022)	Equity is inseparable from rigor; design must embed culturally responsive pedagogy, inquiry, and leadership practices grounded in relational trust and community knowledge.

Building on this analytic summary, Figure 4 provides a conceptual synthesis illustrating how the three bins converge to position course design as the mechanism for transformational learning. Together, the table and figure work in tandem to show both the scope and synthesis of the reviewed scholarship. Table 2 captures the theoretical and empirical depth of each domain, while Figure 4 visualizes how these strands integrate. The convergence of these literatures underscores that course design functions as the integrative mechanism linking adult development, online engagement, and equity praxis to produce transformational outcomes in professional doctoral education.

Summary of Chapter 2

The synthesis presented in Table 2 and Figure 4 demonstrates how the reviewed scholarship collectively informs this study's conceptual framework. Transformational learning in professional doctoral programs emerges when course design intentionally integrates developmental challenge, relational trust, and equity praxis.

Bin 1: Transformative adult learning and development explains how reflection, dialogue, and liminality support growth and identity formation among doctoral learners. Bin 2: Online learning frameworks detail how presence and interaction, anchored in transactional distance and the Community of Inquiry (CoI), can structure meaningful engagement in digital spaces. Extensions through the Community Learning Exchange (CLE) axioms emphasize that equity, culture, and affect must also be intentionally designed into those environments. Bin 3: Equity as rigor and praxis reframes the meaning of quality and rigor, demonstrating that culturally responsive pedagogy and justice-oriented leadership practices are essential features of doctoral education.



Note. The figure depicts how transformative development, online learning frameworks, and equity as rigor and praxis intersect to form the conceptual foundation for this study.

Figure 4. Conceptual synthesis informing transformational program design.

Together, these three domains converge on a central insight: course design serves as the lever that shifts professional doctoral education from transactional routines to transformational practice. Theories of adult development, online engagement, and equity praxis confirm that design choices are never neutral; they determine whether learners feel connected, valued, and prepared to lead for equity and systemic change.

This synthesis also suggests that program features act as anchoring forces, such as belonging, trust, and adult development; and activating forces like equity praxis and systemic leadership concepts that reappear in the findings and discussion chapters, anchored in the three literature bins: transformative development, online learning frameworks, and equity as rigor and praxis. The next chapter explores how these design commitments are implemented within the context, structures, and everyday course routines of the International EdD.

CHAPTER 3: PROGRAM CONTEXT

Higher education in the United States encompasses considerable variability in educational focus and student experiences across institutions. While hundreds of universities offer the Doctor of Education (EdD), each institution develops its own philosophies, approaches to dissertations, and curricular emphases. Even within a single university, student experiences can vary across degree programs due to factors such as campus culture and funding models, as reflected in program syllabi.

To situate the program examined in this study within this landscape, this qualitative case study focuses on the International EdD at East Carolina University (ECU). The following sections outline the program's distinctive characteristics, including its origins, guiding values, structure and delivery, pedagogical commitments, dissertation approach, community culture, faculty expertise, and outcomes. Descriptions are drawn from Cohort 4 syllabi and program records to illustrate how structures and expectations were codified in program design and implementation.

Program Origins and Rationale

The International EdD was developed in response to national calls to reimagine professional doctorates in education. Historically, the EdD has been compared unfavorably to the PhD, often critiqued as lacking both the scholarly rigor of research doctorates and the practical utility required by educational leaders. In 2007, the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) launched a reform movement that challenged institutions to reconceptualize the EdD around practice-anchored inquiry, applied research, and the improvement of professional practice (Perry, 2013, 2015).

ECU joined CPED as a member institution and committed to transforming its program. In alignment with CPED principles, ECU faculty and school district leaders collaboratively designed the Off-Model EdD to serve full-time educators seeking advanced leadership preparation. This design integrated dissertation work with coursework, emphasized community engagement, and incorporated ethically responsive inquiry as a recurring element. Formally approved in 2015, the Off-Model EdD expanded in 2016 to include the International Cohort, extending access beyond North Carolina and the United States. This expansion aimed to maintain academic rigor while increasing flexibility and relevance for educational leaders in diverse global contexts. It also advanced ECU's mission to increase graduate enrollment, strengthen global partnerships, and promote broader educational access and opportunity.

Program Values and Anchors

Program values and anchors are articulated in cohort syllabi and program documents, with ethical responsiveness and relational leadership identified as organizing principles for inquiry and practice. Courses and assignments emphasize analysis of systemic contexts and the design of actions that promote fairness, opportunity, and continuous improvement.

Five Community Learning Exchange (CLE) axioms guide candidate research framing, partnership, and examination of positionality: learning and leadership are dynamic social processes; conversations are central pedagogical processes; those closest to the issues are best positioned to act; crossing boundaries enriches development and learning; and hope and change are built on assets and dreams (Guajardo et al., 2016).

Consistent with these values, the program emphasizes participatory and collaborative leadership. Candidates learn to build distributed systems involving stakeholders, design data-informed improvement plans, conduct listening sessions, and partner with community

organizations. Transformational learning is supported by signature practices, including Dynamic Mindfulness, personal narrative, and dialogical learning, which are embedded throughout coursework and advising. Ethics is treated as an explicit anchor, with students practicing moral courage and principled decision-making. Inquiry is cultivated as a leadership stance, with graduates equipped for evidence-based problem solving, participatory research, and iterative reflection.

Values are also modeled by faculty and advisors, with protocols structured to reflect a relational and human-centered environment. Leadership is defined as social influence rather than positional authority, empowering candidates across roles to lead from where they are.

These commitments situate the International EdD within CPED's larger reform movement and the CLE tradition. Table 3 illustrates this integration by aligning CPED principles, CLE axioms, and specific elements of ECU's Off-Model design. The table highlights how national reform commitments are braided with community-based practices to create a program identity that is both philosophically grounded and practically enacted.

These values and design commitments do not remain abstract ideals; they are enacted through the structure and delivery of the International EdD. The following section describes how the program's design translates these philosophical anchors into practice through its cohort model, integrated curriculum, and global learning exchanges that operationalize belonging, inquiry, and ethical responsiveness in everyday learning routines.

Table 3

Alignment of CPED Principles, CLE Axioms, and ECU EdD

CPED Principles	CLE Axioms	ECU EdD
1) Are framed around questions of equity, ethics, and social justice to bring about solutions to complex problems of practice as articulated by CPED (2019).	Learning and leadership are dynamic social processes.	Develop specific, doable, measurable, and ethically grounded data to analyze the iterative and dynamic work.
2) Prepare leaders who can construct and apply knowledge to make a positive difference in the lives of individuals, families, organizations, and communities.	The people closest to the issues are best situated to address local concerns.	Honor the wisdom of people and groups to co-generate and collaborate on the focus of practice to achieve fair and context-responsive outcomes.
3) Provide opportunities for candidates to develop and demonstrate collaboration and communication skills to work with diverse communities and to build partnerships.	Hope and change are built on assets and dreams of locals and their communities.	Honor the wisdom of people and groups to co-generate and collaborate on the focus of practice and meaningful improvement outcomes.
4) Provide field-based opportunities to analyze problems of practice and use multiple frames to develop meaningful solutions.	Conversations are critical and central pedagogical processes.	The focus (not problem) of the improvement effort or innovation requires constituent (user) input and reflective dialogue.
5) Develop a professional knowledge base that integrates both practical and research knowledge and links theory with systemic and systematic inquiry.	Crossing boundaries enriches developmental and educational processes.	Use current assets to address challenges as a collaborative and reflective co-practitioner team.

Table 3 (continued)

CPED Principles	CLE Axioms	ECU EdD
6) Emphasize the generation, transformation, and use of professional knowledge and practice.	Learning and leadership are dynamic social processes.	Enact the Plan, Do, Study, Act Cycle with praxis and inquiry (reflective practice) as guiding principles.

Note. Adapted from *Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) Design Principles Framework* (CPED, 2019). CLE = Community Learning Exchange; ECU EdD = East Carolina University, Doctor of Education.

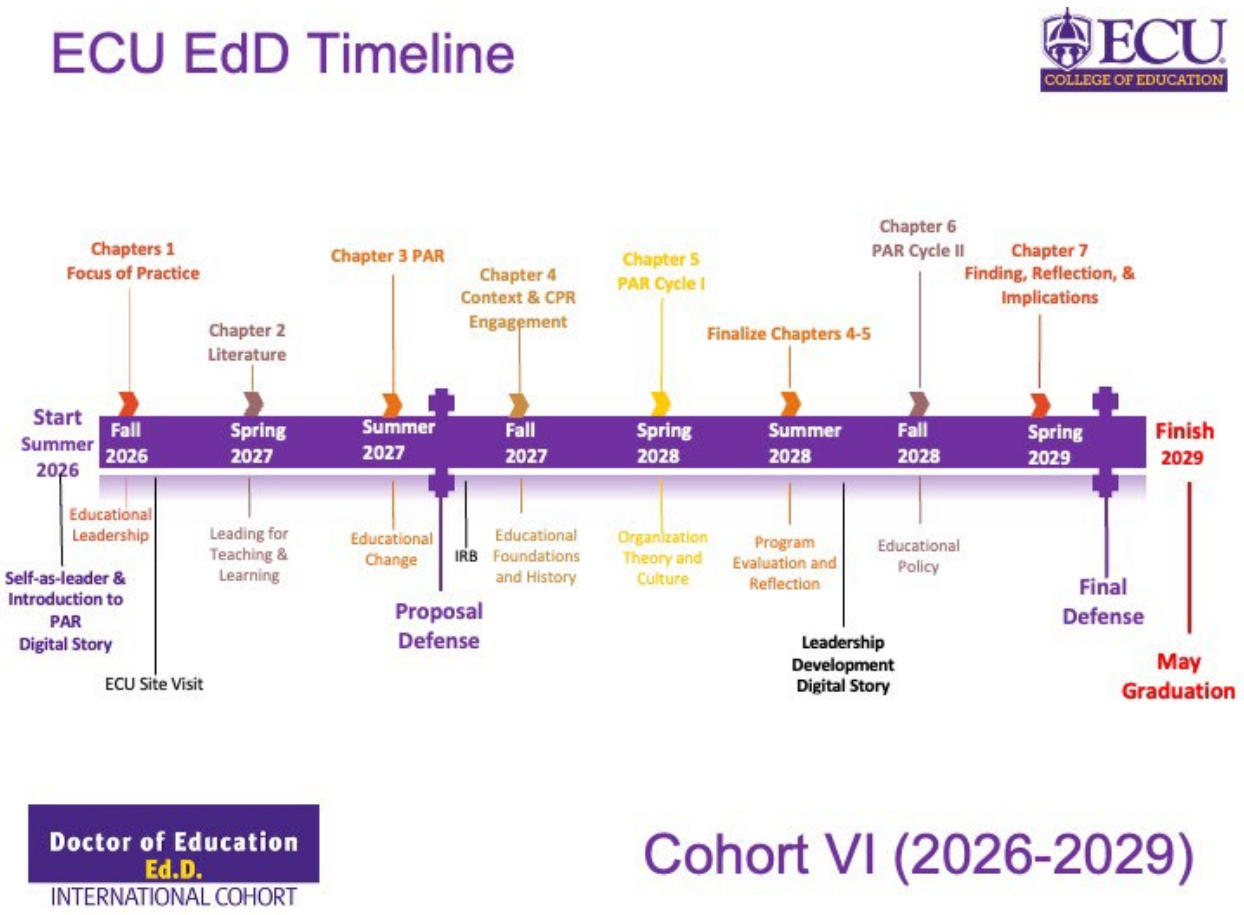
Program Structure and Delivery

The International EdD is structured to balance rigor, relevance, and feasibility for experienced professionals. Its design integrates three years of coursework, residencies, and dissertation milestones while foregrounding relational trust, developmentally responsive practice, and adult developmental growth. The following subsections describe the program's structural features and delivery mechanisms, beginning with the cohort model and extending through its hybrid design, annual residencies, developmental scaffolds, and signature pedagogies. Figure 5 provides a schematic overview of this three-year design, highlighting how coursework, residencies, and dissertation milestones are sequenced to foster persistence, belonging, and transformational growth.

As shown in Figure 5, the International EdD intentionally sequences coursework, residencies, and dissertation milestones across six semesters. Rather than treating the dissertation as a post-coursework phase, the program weaves Chapters 1–7 through the full arc of study, with candidacy and IRB nested at the midpoint and writing/revision cycles sustained to completion. This continuity undergirds the cohort model's emphasis on belonging, trust, and steady progress.

Three-Year Cohort Design

The International EdD is structured to meet the needs of experienced education professionals balancing full-time work, family responsibilities, and advanced scholarship. The program follows a three-year, cohort-based model that integrates coursework and dissertation development across a continuous timeline to address these demands. This design provides a clear pathway to degree completion while maintaining academic rigor and relevance to practice.



Note. The timeline illustrates six consecutive semesters across three years, integrating coursework, annual Summer Learning Exchanges (SLEs), and dissertation milestones (proposal, IRB, chapters, and defenses). Image used with permission from ECU College of Education program materials.

Figure 5. Int. cohort program structure timeline.

The academic calendar is divided into six semesters, with students completing two to three courses per term, including the summer term. The program uses a single-syllabus model, integrating courses and dissertation milestones. Each semester's content is organized around a unifying theme (e.g., leadership, organizational change, ethical responsiveness, inquiry) and includes both content instruction and structured dissertation work. For example, candidates might explore organizational theory while drafting their conceptual framework or conducting a literature review. Syllabi codified these expectations: "By the end of the design course, students complete Chapter 1 of the dissertation: Naming and Framing a Focus of Practice". Later syllabi required drafts of Chapter 2 and completion of Chapter 4, illustrating a spiraling curriculum that wove dissertation progress into content learning. As shown in Figure 5, the program integrates dissertation milestones and embedded tasks across semesters. Chapter drafts are produced sequentially, allowing candidates to build toward a comprehensive, practice-oriented research project by the third year (program records).

Hybrid Delivery Model

The International EdD employs a hybrid delivery model that combines asynchronous coursework, synchronous WebExchanges, and intensive face-to-face residencies. This structure balances flexibility for working professionals with opportunities for relational depth and collaborative learning. Online modules allow students to remain embedded in their professional contexts, applying course concepts in real time while maintaining an inquiry stance.

The WebExchanges held weekly or biweekly translate the Community Learning Exchange (CLE) axioms into virtual practice. Each session positions learning and leadership as dynamic social processes through interactive dialogue, peer coaching, and reflection on focus of practice. The sessions also enact the axiom that conversations are central pedagogies, using

dialogue protocols to surface multiple perspectives and deepen critical inquiry. In keeping with the principle that those closest to the issues are best situated to address them, candidates introduce dilemmas from their workplaces, which become the basis for collective problem-solving and data-informed reflection.

Within these synchronous spaces, faculty and students co-construct knowledge through storytelling, design critique, and collaborative analysis, extending the CLE emphasis on relational trust and reciprocity into a digital environment. Advisory systems reinforce these commitments. Each candidate meets regularly with a Lead Research Advisor (LRA) who serves as a scholarly partner and developmental coach across the three-year program. These individualized check-ins echo the CLE axiom that *hope and change are built on community assets and dreams*, emphasizing strengths, growth, and co-creation rather than deficit correction. By integrating asynchronous flexibility, synchronous interaction, and personalized mentoring, the hybrid model supports both academic rigor and persistence in a program intentionally designed for full-time professionals.

Each WebExchange follows a shared agenda distributed in advance, commonly including (a) a grounding or mindfulness routine, (b) cohort check-ins on dissertation milestones, (c) small-group reflection or data consultation, and (d) closing commitments. Agendas are co-constructed by faculty and students to balance relational trust with academic rigor, ensuring that belonging and developmentally responsive practice remain active throughout the year. These structured sessions also serve as continuity points linking asynchronous coursework, residencies, and dissertation milestones (see Appendix C; for illustrative agendas and pre-session materials).

Summer Learning Exchanges

The Summer Learning Exchanges (SLEs) serve as the academic and relational anchors of the International EdD program. Held annually in Bangkok, Thailand, the SLEs extend the hybrid model into immersive, face-to-face learning environments. Each residency provides structured opportunities for critical dialogue, collaborative writing, and community building. Cohort syllabi framed the residencies as spaces to "cultivate relational trust as a cohort" while engaging in cornerstone practices such as CLE processes, Dynamic Mindfulness, arts integration, and human-centered, reflective design thinking.

The SLEs operationalize all five CLE axioms in embodied form. Learning and leadership unfold as dynamic social processes through collective inquiry and reciprocal facilitation. Conversations serve as central pedagogies, guiding daily opening and closing circles that invite reflection, feedback, and shared meaning-making. The axiom that those closest to the issues are best situated to address them is enacted as candidates bring data and stories from their home contexts into the residency for collaborative interpretation. Crossing boundaries enriches development by allowing participants to collaborate across cultures, languages, and educational systems, engaging in comparative analysis that expands perspectives on ethical and contextual dimensions of leadership. Finally, hope builds on community assets and dreams are expressed through storytelling, celebration, and visioning sessions that honor participants' experiences and aspirations.

These residencies function as crucibles where belonging, ethical responsivenss, and inquiry are enacted rather than discussed abstractly. Sessions often begin and end with circle protocols that encourage reciprocity and shared responsibility. Workshops integrate academic rigor with identity work, digital storytelling, arts-based reflection, and collaborative policy

analysis linking personal transformation to systemic leadership. Situated in an international context, the SLEs challenge participants to examine power and culture across global and local boundaries. Together, they anchor the program's hybrid model by providing a living expression of leadership that advances fairness, access, and participatory inquiry. The SLEs thus exemplify the CLE view that learning and leadership are relational, contextual, and grounded in community assets, reinforcing the program's commitment to ethically responsive practice and transformational adult development.

Scaffolded Developmental Arc

Assignments across the six semesters are intentionally scaffolded to move students from personal narrative and self-reflection toward inquiry, collaboration, and systems-level analysis. This developmental progression reflects adult learning principles, particularly Mezirow's (1997) theory of transformative learning and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle. Early assignments invite students to surface and interrogate their values, identities, and lived experiences through autobiographies, "I Am From" poems, and digital stories. These artifacts foster vulnerability and trust while situating leadership development within personal and cultural context.

As students progress through the curriculum, assignments become increasingly collaborative and inquiry-driven. Mid-program tasks emphasize stakeholder engagement, participatory data collection, and inquiry protocols to co-generate knowledge with colleagues and community members. Students are expected to integrate advanced analytic tools and systemic perspectives by the later semesters, positioning their work within broader organizational and policy contexts. Each stage builds deliberately on the prior one, reinforcing that leadership growth is iterative, relational, and ethically responsive.

The scaffolded arc ensures steady dissertation progress and supports candidates' adult developmental growth. Students learn to link self-knowledge to professional practice, expand their capacity to navigate complexity, and engage in ethically-responsive change efforts. In this way, the curriculum functions as a developmental journey, preparing leaders to transition from self-as-leader to systemic transformation.

Three-Year Scope and Sequence

The International EdD unfolds through a carefully sequenced, three-year arc that integrates identity work, collaborative inquiry, and systems-level leadership. **Year 1** emphasizes the foundations of identity and inquiry. Through autobiographies, "I Am From" poems, mandalas, and digital stories, candidates explore their self-as-leader identity while simultaneously drafting early dissertation chapters, including Chapter 1 (Focus of Practice) and Chapter 2 (Literature Review), within courses on leadership, ethical and context-responsive practice, and teaching and learning. These experiences establish the reflective and relational stance that anchors the program.

Year 2 emphasizes design and proposal development. Candidates improve Chapters 1–3, defend their proposals, and submit IRB applications, while starting their first Participatory Action Research (PAR) cycles in collaboration with co-practitioner researchers. Coursework highlights organizational theory, improvement science, and systems thinking, connecting conceptual frameworks to local settings.

Year 3 centers on analysis, synthesis, and action. Students analyze and interpret data, complete Chapters 4–7, and translate findings into leadership implications for systemic change. The culminating *Digital Story of Leadership* serves as a reflective capstone, integrating personal growth with professional agency.

Annual Summer Learning Exchanges (SLEs) provide anchor points for this progression: SLE I (Self and Community), SLE II (Construction Zone and Proposal), and SLE III (Sense-Making and Leadership). Each residency deepens belonging and reflective practice, offering space for critical dialogue, collaborative writing, and reflection in community. This developmental scope aligns with the CLE–CPED crosswalk (see Table 3), illustrating how national design principles and axioms are enacted through the program's structure, pedagogy, and dissertation milestones.

Pedagogical Philosophy

The International EdD is grounded in transformative and participatory pedagogies designed to cultivate critically self-reflective, ethically-responsive, and action-oriented leaders. Program documents and syllabi articulate an explicit stance: leadership is not positional authority, but a relational practice shaped by dialogue, inquiry, and community.

Instruction draws heavily from Community Learning Exchange (CLE) principles, emphasizing that knowledge is rooted in culture, lived experience, and community assets. Learning is framed as a relational process, requiring trust, vulnerability, and co-construction. Cohort 4 syllabi codified this orientation through reflective commitments, such as using storytelling, both oral and digital, to deepen self-awareness, professional skills, and ethical leadership practices. Faculty and advisors embed protocols that embody this philosophy. These include Dynamic Mindfulness (a trauma-informed practice of presence and focus), Gracious Space (an invitational stance that welcomes difference and encourages learning in public), and personal narrative practices such as autobiographies, endowed objects, and digital stories. Together, these protocols reinforce the understanding that ethical responsiveness and transformation are cultivated through relationships, reflection, and dialogical practice. This

pedagogical philosophy shapes classroom experiences and provides the foundation for the program's signature pedagogies. The following subsection outlines these pedagogies and illustrates how they are intentionally clustered to scaffold identity, inquiry, and ethical praxis across the curriculum.

Signature Pedagogies

The International EdD is distinguished by a set of signature pedagogies intentionally embedded across coursework, residencies, and advising. These pedagogies reflect the program's philosophical stance that learning is experiential, dialogical, and ethically responsive. They fall into three interrelated clusters: cornerstone practices (CLE protocols, Dynamic Mindfulness, arts integration, and human-centered, reflective design thinking); research and inquiry pedagogies (Participatory Action Research [PAR], reflective practice, and collaborative inquiry with co-practitioner researchers); and reflective identity practices (autobiographies, digital storytelling, endowed objects, and related narrative artifacts).Together, these pedagogical commitments form a coherent framework that scaffolds identity, inquiry, and applied reflection across the curriculum. Students are positioned as scholar-practitioners who bring expertise to academic discussions. Assignments such as autobiographies, Mandalas, Norigae, endowed objects, and digital stories are sequenced to support identity exploration, relational trust, and leadership stance (see Appendix D for sample prompts). These practices foreshadow findings in Chapter 5, where students describe such artifacts as transformative entry points into belonging and leadership identity. Table 4 summarizes the theoretical roots of each pedagogy and the program values that anchor them.

Table 4

Signature Pedagogies of the Int. EdD, Theoretical Roots, and Program Value Anchors

Signature Pedagogy	Theoretical Roots	Program Value Anchors
CLE Processes	Community Learning Exchange axioms (Guajardo et al., 2016); dialogical pedagogy (Freire, 1970).	Program explicitly adopts CLE axioms; CPED principles: inquiry grounded in community and ethical engagement.
Dynamic Mindfulness	Trauma-informed pedagogy (Jennings, 2015); adult development (Drago-Severson, 2009).	Program documents emphasize relational trust and well-being as conditions for persistence.
Arts Integration	Transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991); aesthetic education (Greene, 1995); narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).	Emphasizes multiple ways of knowing; CPED principle: integration of theory and practice.
Human-Centered Reflective Design Thinking	Design justice frameworks (Costanza-Chock, 2020); improvement science (Bryk et al., 2015).	CPED principle: addressing problems of practice with collaborative, context-responsive design.
PAR Methodology	Participatory action research traditions (Reason & Bradbury, 2008).	Required research stance in syllabi; promotes inquiry as collaborative and context-aware
Reflective Practice	Freirean pedagogy (Freire, 1970); double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978).	CLE axiom: learning requires action; CPED principle: inquiry as a stance.
Reflective Identity Practices (Autobiography, Digital Story, Endowed Object, Reflective Memos, Norigae, etc.)	Reflexivity (Finlay, 2002); transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991); experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984); narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).	Program documents emphasize identity as leadership foundation; CPED principle: practitioner knowledge as scholarship.

Note. Table synthesizes program syllabi, CPED Proposal (2024), Militello et al. (2023), and theoretical sources (see Chapter 2).

As shown in Table 4, the program's pedagogies are deliberate enactments of ethical and reflective practice rather than isolated classroom strategies. These commitments extend directly into the dissertation approach, where inquiry is framed as both a scholarly process and a stance for ethically responsive leadership. Together, these signature pedagogies embody the program's theory of action: transformational leadership develops through cycles of reflection, inquiry, and applied reflection enacted within a community of trust. Each practice reinforces the program's central design anchors—belonging, development, and ethical responsiveness—by inviting candidates to integrate who they are, what they study, and how they lead. In this way, the pedagogical framework serves not only as a structure for coursework but also as a lived curriculum for adult growth, social learning, and ethically responsive leadership.

Dissertation Approach

The dissertation design of the International EdD is not a separate or add-on component of the program; rather, it represents the culminating expression of its pedagogical commitments. Just as coursework emphasizes identity, inquiry, and applied reflection, the dissertation requires students to extend these commitments into a sustained, practice-based research project.

Dissertation Model and Structure

Unlike the traditional five-chapter dissertation, which is often completed after coursework, the International EdD requires a seven-chapter dissertation embedded throughout the three-year curriculum. Chapter drafts are developed across semesters in tandem with content learning, positioning inquiry as a continuous process rather than a capstone task.

In earlier cohorts (1–4), the process was supported by a coaching system alongside the Lead Research Advisor (LRA). Coaches met with students regularly to provide feedback on drafts and help manage workload, serving as thought partners in navigating milestones.

Beginning with Cohort 5, the program transitioned to a lead reader model, a structure that continues at present. For Cohort 4, the coaching model was still in place and is therefore described here to provide accurate context (program records; CPED Proposal, 2024).

~~Problem~~ Focus of Practice

Students begin their dissertations by identifying a Focus of Practice (FoP), a term intentionally chosen over "Problem of Practice." This shift in language reflects the program's commitment to developmentally responsive learning and strengths-based inquiry grounded in continuous improvement. Whereas "problem" implies deficit and remediation, the FoP emphasizes local strengths, opportunities, and possibilities for generative change. The framing is consistent with CLE axioms, which stress that those closest to the issue are best positioned to create solutions, and that hope and change are built on assets and dreams (Guajardo et al., 2016).

Identifying the FoP is an iterative process. Students are guided to frame their focus in collaboration with colleagues, supervisors, families, students, or community members, ensuring that the inquiry is relevant and co-owned. Advisors and peers provide structured feedback as students refine their FoP during the design course, helping them move from broad concerns to ethically responsive, actionable inquiries. In this way, the FoP emerges not only from students' leadership identities but also from the needs and aspirations of their local contexts.

The FoP also serves as a developmental anchor throughout the dissertation. It frames Chapter 1, guides literature exploration in Chapter 2, grounds methodological choices in Chapter 3, and shapes data analysis, policy analysis, and implications in later chapters. This continuity reinforces the stance that leadership is not about fixing deficits but about mobilizing strengths and partnerships to advance ethical and systemic improvement.

PAR Methodology

All candidates are required to use Participatory Action Research (PAR) as the methodological stance for their dissertations. This requirement reflects the program's belief that inquiry must not only generate knowledge but also advance ethical understanding and systemic improvement. PAR draws from participatory traditions that position those closest to the issue as co-constructors of knowledge (Reason & Bradbury, 2008) .

Within this approach, students co-develop research questions with colleagues, supervisors, families, students, or community members who are directly affected by the issue under study. These co-practitioner researchers are involved in shaping the inquiry, contributing data, co-interpreting findings, and, in some cases, participating in action steps. This collaborative stance enhances relevance, builds relational trust, and models the program's philosophy that leadership and learning are social processes rooted in community. The PAR stance also structures the inquiry process itself. Students engage in iterative cycles modeled on both PAR and improvement science, moving through phases of data generation, reflection, analysis, and action. Reflection is not treated as an afterthought but as a deliberate step for learning and adaptation. Throughout the dissertation timeline, candidates document these cycles through reflective memos and collaborative analysis sessions, reinforcing the stance that inquiry and leadership are inextricably linked.

In this way, PAR functions simultaneously as a methodology and a leadership stance. It positions students as scholar-practitioners working *with* communities to examine systems, improve practice, and co-create ethically grounded alternatives.

Scaffolding Across Semesters

The seven-chapter dissertation is deliberately scaffolded across the three-year program, allowing inquiry and leadership development to progress in tandem. This approach contrasts with traditional five-chapter dissertations, which are often completed after coursework and can feel disconnected from practice. By embedding dissertation work within each semester, the International EdD positions inquiry as a living process that evolves alongside content learning and leadership growth.

Chapter development unfolds in deliberate stages. Chapter 1, which frames the Focus of Practice (FoP), is completed during the design course in the first semester. Chapter 2, the literature review, is drafted during the second term, while Chapter 3 (methods) is developed in the context of data collection and methodological learning. Later chapters build on this foundation: Chapter 4 presents data analysis, Chapter 5 focuses on findings and interpretation, and Chapters 6 and 7 emphasize policy analysis and leadership implications. This sequencing ensures that students consistently build toward the final dissertation, rather than postponing major milestones until the end of the program.

The scaffolded model also integrates adult learning principles by aligning personal identity work with scholarly development. Early assignments such as autobiographies, digital stories, and reflective memos build self-awareness and relational trust, which then inform the framing of the FoP. Midway through the program, students practice participatory data collection and collaborative analysis, reinforcing the PAR stance of inquiry. By the later semesters, students are expected to move beyond description into policy analysis and systemic understanding, demonstrating their capacity to link local practice to broader educational change.

This spiraling, iterative design reinforces the program's philosophy that doctoral research is an academic exercise and a developmental journey. By scaffolding inquiry across semesters, the International EdD ensures that students leave with a completed dissertation and an ethically responsible stance that can be sustained in their professional practice.

Advising and Faculty Support

Advising is a central feature of the dissertation design, providing candidates with consistent academic guidance and relational support. The program employs a multi-layered system in which faculty, Lead Research Advisors (LRAs), and, in earlier cohorts, dissertation coaches worked together to mentor students across the three-year arc.

Faculty members provide conceptual and methodological guidance, helping candidates align their Focus of Practice with equity dilemmas, frame research questions, and maintain rigor in the use of PAR methodology. Their role includes modeling the stance of inquiry as leadership, demonstrating how scholarly tools can be mobilized for practice-based change.

Lead Research Advisors serve as the primary point of contact for dissertation progress. Many LRAs are program alumni who bring both scholarly expertise and empathy for the doctoral journey. They provide individualized feedback on writing, project management strategies, and encouragement through the challenges of balancing professional, personal, and academic responsibilities. Regular check-ins conducted biweekly or monthly function as structured touchpoints that keep students on pace with milestones while reinforcing the cohort's culture of accountability and support.

In Cohorts 1–4, the program also employed a coaching system to supplement the advising structure. Coaches met regularly with students to review drafts and offer process-oriented feedback. While the model transitioned to a lead reader system starting with Cohort 5, the

coaching model remained in place for Cohort 4, the focus of this study, and is therefore described here for accuracy (program records; CPED Proposal, 2024).

This layered advising system reflects the program's commitment to ethical responsiveness and persistence. By blending scholarly mentorship with relational trust, advising structures not only support dissertation completion but also model the type of collaborative leadership the program seeks to cultivate.

Inquiry Beyond Graduation

The program frames the dissertation not as an endpoint but as the beginning of an ongoing stance of inquiry. Graduates are encouraged to see themselves as scholar-practitioners who continue cycles of research, reflection, and action well beyond degree completion. Program records show that many alumni sustain their PAR commitments by participating in research–practice partnerships, publishing findings, co-presenting at conferences, and mentoring new doctoral students.

This continuation reflects the program's central claim that inquiry and leadership are inseparable. By cultivating reflection, collaboration, and ethically-responsive problem-solving habits, the dissertation design equips graduates to approach new dilemmas with the same stance they developed during the program. In practice, graduates have applied these capacities in varied ways, such as leading district-level equity inventories, expanding access to advanced coursework, designing culturally responsive professional development, or advocating systemic policy changes.

In this way, inquiry becomes both a professional identity and a leadership tool. The dissertation process prepares graduates not only to complete a rigorous academic project but also

to carry forward a lifelong commitment to ethically responsive inquiry that shapes their leadership trajectories and contributions to the field.

Summer Learning Exchanges

While earlier sections described the Summer Learning Exchanges (SLEs) as a core element of the program's hybrid delivery model, their significance extends beyond a single residency. Taken together, the three residencies form a developmental arc that structures the doctoral journey. Each SLE builds intentionally on the previous one, guiding students from early identity exploration to dissertation construction and, ultimately, to analytic integration and leadership synthesis. Table 5 provides a comparative overview of the three residencies, highlighting their primary foci, signature artifacts, pedagogical approaches, and connections to dissertation milestones.

As shown in Table 5, the SLEs are intentionally sequenced to move students through three phases: Self as Leader (SLE I), Construction Zone (SLE II), and Sense-Making (SLE III). Together, these residencies provide anchor points in which ethical responsiveness, belonging, and collaborative inquiry are enacted in practice. They also function as crucibles for identity formation, relational trust, and scholarly growth, reinforcing the program's commitment to developing leaders who embody inquiry as a stance.

Table 5

Developmental Arc of Summer Learning Exchanges

Row Category	SLE I – Self as Leader	SLE II – Construction Zone	SLE III – Sense-making
Focus/theme	Understanding self-as-leader; building relational trust; foundational knowledge in qualitative inquiry and improvement science.	Change theory and dissertation proposal; Chapters 1–3; candidacy milestone with IRB proposal.	Human resource development and program evaluation; advanced data analysis; PAR cycle reflection; leadership synthesis.
Identity/self as leader	Exploring self to frame FoP; activities: Autobiography, Emulation Poem, Mandala, ontology/epistemology discussions.	Examining multiple identities; activities: Endowed Object reflection, Journey Line of critical change.	Deepening leadership identity; Norigae as Mandala Redux; reflection from practitioner to practitioner-researcher.
Research skill-building	Introductory skills in qualitative inquiry; assignments: field notes, memos, researcher positioning.	Advanced data collection with CLEs; writing methods (Chapter 3).	Preparing for next PAR cycle; analytic narrative reflection; discussions on validity/triangulation.
Data analysis/sense-making	Intro to coding (Saldaña); community inquiry connections; reflective memos with Kolb cycle.	Applying change theory (Fullan, Rogers, Marris) to PAR; finalizing data sections (Chapter 3).	Deeper analysis for Chapters 5–6; sensemaking/sensegiving (Norris); Human-centered reflective design practices.
Signature artifacts	Digital Story of Self; Research Journey Line; Reflective Memo.	Proposal Poster and Video; Drafts of Chapters 1–3; Oral Presentation (Chapter 2).	Leadership Story (digital); Emerging Findings Poster; Revisions to Chapters 4–5.

Table 5 (continued)

Row Category	SLE I – Self as Leader	SLE II – Construction Zone	SLE III – Sense-making
Pedagogical approaches	CLE protocols; arts integration (Mandala, Digital Storytelling, Emulation Poem).	Seminar learning; CLE methodology; spiraling revisions; experiential approaches.	Socratic Seminar; arts integration (Norigae as Mandala Redux); peer review; Human-centered reflective design.
Dissertation milestones	Initial FoP framing; PAR introduction.	Complete Chapters 1–3; IRB proposal submission.	Complete Chapters 4–5; prepare for Chapters 6–7.

Note. SLE = Signature Learning Experience; FoP = Focus of Practice; PAR = Plan, Act, Assess, Reflect; CLE = Community Learning Exchange.

Community and Cohort Culture

Community is a defining feature of the International EdD. Recognizing that many EdD students are full-time professionals balancing work, family, and doctoral study, the program deliberately cultivates relational trust and social presence as central to persistence and transformation. Rather than treating community as an incidental byproduct, the program frames it as a pedagogical priority, embedding rituals, collaborative structures, and advising systems that ensure students experience belonging and accountability throughout their doctoral journey.

The cohort model provides the foundation for this culture. Students' progress together across three years, engaging in shared courses, dissertation milestones, and residencies. This continuity fosters strong peer relationships and creates a "critical friends" network that provides feedback, challenges assumptions, and celebrates milestones. Faculty refer to the cohort as a collaborative learning team, emphasizing that the group's wisdom is as important as the contributions of individuals. Structured practices reinforce this sense of community. Weekly or biweekly WebExchanges provide space for dialogue, feedback, and problem-solving, while advisory groups ensure that each student has consistent guidance and relational support. Rituals such as circle protocols, storytelling, and artifact-sharing (e.g., autobiographies, digital stories, endowed objects) cultivate vulnerability, reciprocity, and collective responsibility. These practices reflect CLE axioms that treat conversations as central pedagogical processes and affirm that those closest to the issue are best positioned to create solutions (Guajardo et al., 2016).

Community is also understood as a stance that extends beyond the cohort. Candidates are encouraged to see themselves as part of a broader professional and scholarly network. Graduates describe the program as both a degree and an entry into a community of scholar-practitioners committed to equity-focused leadership. In this way, the program models leadership as collective

and relational, preparing students to build and sustain communities of practice in their own professional contexts.

Outcomes and Impacts

The outcomes of the International EdD provide evidence of how the program's design translates into measurable persistence, leadership growth, and professional impact. Drawing from institutional records, faculty documentation, and external evaluation data, this section highlights both program-level achievements and alumni perceptions of their development. Together, these indicators demonstrate the coherence between the program's structure and its long-term effects on graduates' practice and leadership agency.

Program Completion and Leadership Outcomes

Across its first five cohorts, the International EdD has demonstrated exceptional persistence and completion. Since its inception, fifty-six students have enrolled, and fifty-one have completed the degree (91 percent overall completion). Nearly nine in ten graduates (88 percent) finished within the program's three-year design cycle, a rate that far exceeds national averages for professional doctorates. These outcomes are not merely numerical achievements; they reflect a design that balances rigor with relational support. High persistence is sustained by structures that make success possible for working professionals, including cohort trust, scaffolded dissertation milestones, and faculty engagement grounded in care and accountability (CPED Proposal, 2024).

Faculty attribute these results to the program's distinctive design: a cohort model that builds community and accountability, a dissertation process integrated across coursework, and an instructional philosophy that treats belonging and trust as essential conditions of rigor. Together,

these features have created a culture where candidates persist through professional and personal demands while maintaining high scholarly standards.

The program's success also reflects the depth of faculty expertise that sustains its design. International EdD faculty are active scholars in culturally responsive leadership, improvement science, design thinking, and participatory action research (PAR). They model these commitments through mentoring, collaborative publications, and international presentations that often engage graduates as co-authors and co-presenters.

Graduates have assumed senior leadership positions in schools, districts, higher education, and nonprofit organizations. Many graduates described how the program's emphasis on what they called "equity-focused" reflection and participatory inquiry shaped their ability to design and lead organizational improvements. Examples include restructuring district equity inventories, advancing culturally responsive curricula, and advocating for policy shifts that improve access and opportunity for underserved communities.

Alongside professional growth, graduates add to both academic and practical knowledge. Alumni have published peer-reviewed articles, authored book chapters, co-presented with faculty at national and international conferences, and mentored new student groups. This productivity highlights the program's view that practitioner knowledge is a valid and rigorous form of scholarship when approached with reflexivity and ethical awareness. The program's global reach has further broadened its influence. Graduates working in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Caribbean explain how the program prepared them to lead with cultural humility, adapt to policy differences, and collaborate across language and system boundaries. These outcomes show how the International EdD benefits both local communities and global discussions on ethical, context-aware leadership.

Taken together, these institutional outcomes reveal a coherent design logic. Structures that embed trust and accountability strengthen persistence and completion: an ethically responsive stance and participatory inquiry shape leadership trajectories. Scholarly outputs demonstrate that practitioner-researchers can generate knowledge that informs both practice and policy. The International EdD thus exemplifies a doctoral model that is academically rigorous, relationally grounded, and transformative in preparing leaders for systemic change.

Graduate Survey Insights and Program Impact

While program records document substantial completion and leadership outcomes, additional evidence from an independent evaluation further illustrates the International EdD's sustained impact. To complement institutional data, results from a 2024 graduate survey provide a broader perspective on how alumni perceive the program's quality, values orientation, and influence on their professional trajectories.

To further contextualize the International EdD within program-level outcomes, an independent Survey of Doctoral Graduates of ECU's Educational Leadership Programs was conducted in 2024 by Policy Studies Associates, Inc., on behalf of East Carolina University's College of Education. The survey achieved a high overall response rate (estimated in the 80 percent range) and a 97 percent completion rate among respondents. The sample included approximately 63 percent International EdD graduates and 37 percent SEED/Project i4 graduates. Although these data were external to this dissertation's qualitative dataset, they offer valuable descriptive insight into how graduates experienced the program's design, development, and application in practice.

Most respondents started their careers as classroom teachers (about 85 percent) and then moved into leadership positions. Forty percent are now principals, while others serve as assistant

principals, instructional coaches, district directors, or higher education faculty. Nearly half have more than 10 years of experience in education, showing that the program attracts experienced professionals looking for both personal and systemic development.

Graduates identified mission-driven motivations for pursuing the degree. A large majority (82 percent) sought to "be change agents" in education; 67 percent aimed to influence policy or curriculum; 57 percent pursued social-justice advocacy; and 94 percent enrolled for professional growth. Their reasons for choosing ECU reveal strong alignment with the program's core design: a practitioner-oriented structure (75 percent), personal support from faculty and staff (73 percent), three-year completion model (73 percent), cost advantage (66 percent), and hybrid delivery format (60 percent).

Respondents also reported high satisfaction with the program's implementation and relational support. Sixty-seven percent affirmed that the program strengthened their leadership capacity, focused on school improvement. Faculty and coordinator support was rated "great" by 88 percent of graduates, and 83 percent cited strong mentoring and coaching. Feedback from dissertation advisors was especially valued, with 92 percent describing it as "useful" or "very useful."

Graduates credited the program with marked growth in writing, research, and analytic abilities. Ninety-three percent said they became better writers, 97 percent better researchers and data analysts, and 100 percent described themselves as "more fulfilled humans." More than half continue to apply key program tools, such as Community Learning Exchange (CLE) protocols, inquiry cycles, and other collaborative leadership practices, often or always in their professional settings. Reported leadership agency extends beyond individual growth: 45 percent have used their positions to shift policy toward equity, 62 percent collaborate with others to advance

systemic change, 56 percent model CLE strategies for colleagues, and 52 percent facilitate inquiry cycles within their organizations. Cohort relationships also endure, with 65 percent relying on peers for ongoing professional and emotional support. Satisfaction remains exceptionally high, over 80 percent strongly agreed that the program met expectations and learning goals, and 97 percent would recommend it to others.

Together, these findings corroborate the attributes documented in this qualitative case study: belonging, mentoring, and adult development operate as conditions for transformational growth, while ethical responsiveness functions as both rigor and praxis. The survey results, therefore, affirm the program's design coherence and sustained impact, demonstrating that graduates not only complete rigorous dissertations but also continue to enact ethically responsive leadership well beyond degree completion.

Program Coherence and Transition to Methodology

Viewed collectively, the International EdD's structures, guiding frameworks, and outcomes demonstrate coherence between the program's design and its results. Evidence of strong persistence, leadership advancement, and long-term engagement with ethically responsive practice suggests that the International EdD has achieved both rigor and relational depth in preparing leaders for context-responsive improvement. The program represents one institutional response to national reform efforts to reimagine the professional doctorate, integrating a hybrid delivery model, scaffolded dissertation milestones, and ethically responsive pedagogies anchored in the Community Learning Exchange (CLE) axioms and the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) principles.

Table 3 summarizes the intersection of these frameworks, illustrating how national standards for the professional doctorate are enacted through the relational, reflective, and

developmentally responsive design of the International EdD. Organized by areas of emphasis, Table 3 highlights how collaboration, inquiry, and ethical responsiveness function as living anchors that connect philosophical commitments to everyday practice.

This coherence between philosophy and design provides the foundation for examining how participants experience the program in practice. The next chapter describes the methodological approach used to explore these experiences, including the case study design, data sources, and analytic strategies that guided this inquiry.

CHAPTER 4: METHODS

This chapter details how the study was designed, implemented, and evaluated to ensure rigor and ethical integrity. It explains the rationale for the research design, the procedures used to conduct it responsibly, and the strategies employed to establish trustworthiness. The study focused on the Doctor of Education (EdD) International Cohort (Off-Model) in Educational Leadership at East Carolina University (ECU), examined through a single bounded case during the June 2024 Summer Learning Exchange (SLE) in Bangkok, Thailand. The SLE brought together two cohorts of students at different stages of their program, both participating in course-based activities aimed at encouraging transformational growth.

The project was reviewed and approved by ECU's University and Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB; Protocol 23-002481, Exempt). Documentation of IRB approval is included in Appendix A. All participant names used in this chapter and throughout the dissertation are pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

Research Questions

To address the focus of practice, the study was guided by three research questions, presented below:

1. How does the program's learning environment, characterized by its focus on local context, collaborative decision-making, and reflective practice, shape the transformational development of educational leaders?
2. In what ways do the opportunities provided by the program (such as iterative reflective exercises and data-driven decision making) contribute to adult development and transformative leadership practices among participants?

3. How do participants interpret and describe the program's attention to equity, inclusive practices, and critical engagement with institutional norms as influencing their leadership and organizational improvement approaches?

These questions shaped the study's methodological choices. The following section outlines the design and rationale for using a bounded case study approach.

Design and Rationale

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine the International EdD as a living system rather than a collection of isolated parts. A single bounded case study was appropriate because it allowed for close attention to the interplay of routines, conversations, and artifacts as they unfolded during the Summer Learning Exchange (SLE) in Bangkok, Thailand. The case was bounded by time (two consecutive weeks in June 2024), place (the SLE site in Bangkok), participants (Cohorts 4 and 5, along with faculty and facilitators), and activities (course-embedded assignments tied to transformational learning and effective, context-responsive practice).

Cohort 4 and Cohort 5 were observed sequentially. Cohort 4, in its final year of study, participated in the first week of the residency. Cohort 5, beginning the program, participated in the second week. There was a brief period of overlap, approximately two to three days, when both cohorts were present simultaneously. This overlap created a unique opportunity to observe different stages of the doctoral journey in a shared learning environment.

The case study design aligned with the study's theoretical anchor, transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997), adult development (Kegan, 1994; Drago-Severson, 2009), and equity as rigor and praxis (Guajardo et al., 2016) by creating space to observe how course design features supported reflection, dialogue, belonging, and equity analysis in real time. Case study

methodology also offered multiple forms of evidence that could be braided together, strengthening both credibility and trustworthiness (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Artifacts demonstrating analytic rigor, including a sample codebook, coded excerpts, and an audit trail summary, are provided in Appendix E for reference.

To address the research questions, I attended the June 2024 SLE in Bangkok over a period of two weeks. I observed both formal course sessions and informal settings such as meals, travel between sites, and social interactions among students. I conducted semi-structured interviews with students, reviewed reflective memos from Cohort 5, analyzed leadership development chapters from Cohort 4 dissertations, examined course syllabi for both cohorts, and studied SLE syllabi alongside my field observations. I also observed and reviewed WebExchange sessions that occurred before and during the academic year, reviewed the abstracts of all Cohort 4 dissertations, and accessed historical program documents housed on the program's Microsoft Teams site with permission.

In addition, I occasionally asked faculty clarifying questions to better understand how certain assignments and facilitation choices were intended to work. These conversations were not treated as formal data but served to contextualize what I was observing. In analysis, I anchored interpretations in participant evidence (interviews, artifacts, and memos) rather than faculty commentary, using the latter only to clarify program design features.

Together, these actions positioned the study to honor the integrity of the learning environment, center participants' meaning making, and connect micro-moments of practice to broader program structures. With the design and scope of the case established, it is also important to describe the setting in which the study took place and the participants who formed the heart of the residency.

Setting and Participants

This study occurred within the International EdD's June 2024 Summer Learning Exchange (SLE) in Bangkok, Thailand. The residency provided the bounded context for the case, combining a specific time, place, and group of participants engaged in course-embedded activities. The SLE was a signature feature of the program's design, deliberately situating students outside their everyday routines and immersing them in collaborative, equity-centered learning. As such, it offered a rich site to observe how context, curriculum, and community interacted to shape adult development. The following subsections describe the physical and cultural setting, as well as the participants who formed the core of the case.

Setting

This study occurred within the International EdD's June 2024 Summer Learning Exchange (SLE) in Bangkok, Thailand. The residency provided the bounded context for the case, combining a specific time, place, and group of participants engaged in course-embedded activities. In addition to the on-site residency, I also observed several virtual *WebExchanges* to better understand the rhythms and norms of the program's online learning environment. Within the program, WebExchanges are synchronous online meetings conducted through the university's video-conferencing platform to sustain dialogue, community, and continuity between courses. These sessions take place regularly throughout each semester and serve as the program's primary site for collaborative discussions and formative feedback.

I observed one WebExchange with Cohort 4 during the active spring 2024 semester, as part of their regular course routine, and three pre-residency WebExchanges with Cohort 5 in the weeks leading up to the June 2024 SLE. Although virtual, these sessions reflected the same intentional design and relational norms that characterize the program's in-person learning

environments. Each meeting followed a published agenda and was scheduled to accommodate participants across multiple time zones, underscoring the program's global reach and its attention to equitable participation. Faculty modeled presence and relational accountability by keeping cameras on, and this expectation extended to students. Sessions combined structured discussion with small-group dialogue before reconvening for collective synthesis. A Socratic rhythm guided the exchanges, faculty prompted inquiry rather than providing answers, ensuring that all voices were invited into the conversation. Observing these sessions provided insight into how participants and faculty enacted the program's values of presence, inquiry, and shared leadership, which established the mindset carried into the Bangkok residency.

The SLE was a signature feature of the program's design, deliberately situating students outside their everyday routines and immersing them in collaborative, equity-centered learning. Together, the virtual and in-person components offered a rich setting to observe how context, curriculum, and community interacted to shape adult development.

The SLE setting was more than a backdrop; it shaped the rhythms of daily activity and the interactions among students and faculty. Documenting the physical and cultural environment helps illuminate how the residency created conditions for reflection, belonging, and equity-focused practice.

The June 2024 SLE took place at Wells International School in Bangkok, Thailand. The program rented three classrooms on the second level of the school, one of which became the daily "home base." Faculty and staff arrived early each morning to rearrange the space: desks were pushed aside, and brightly colored plastic chairs were placed in a circle. This circular arrangement was used for morning routines, beginning with dynamic mindfulness led by

students, who rotated responsibility for guiding the group. The practice was taken seriously and consistently observed as part of the morning rhythm.

The physical environment reflected both adequacy and contrast. Classrooms had fluorescent lighting, natural light from windows, and individual air-conditioning units that had to be switched on and off each day. Compared to U.S. expectations of private school facilities, the space felt functional rather than polished. Some students brought sweaters or blankets to adjust to the cold classrooms after walking in Bangkok's hot, humid weather. Technology was limited in terms of built-in equipment; there were no smartboards or classroom computers, but there was adequate Wi-Fi and a plentiful supply of outlets for laptops and tablets. The lack of advanced instructional technology did not present a barrier to participation. Instead, students and faculty frequently used sticky notes, chart paper, and dry-erase markers to share ideas, sketch diagrams, and create flow charts. The slower pace of these tools, in contrast to digital platforms, contributed to a focus on writing and conversation. No participants expressed frustration about the absence of more sophisticated technology during observations.

The primary classroom bore signs of its usual function as part of the International Baccalaureate (IB) program at Wells International School. Posters and books, including *Theory of Knowledge* volumes, were visible. This detail highlighted that the program was occurring in a space used for an internationally recognized curriculum also taught in some U.S. schools.

Participants and faculty stayed at a nearby hotel, a ten- to fifteen-minute walk from the school. The hotel provided breakfast, and the restaurant and bar served as informal meeting spaces. Each morning, groups walked together to the school, often stopping at a 7-11 convenience store for coffee and snacks. Over the course of the residency, these snacks accumulated into a communal "snack table" in the home base room, stocked with items such as

dried fruits, nuts, cookies, and local packaged foods. On the return walk, some participants stopped at a massage shop near the hotel, which became a routine way to decompress.

Meals were another site of informal connection. Lunch breaks were often spent at nearby food stalls or small restaurants, with students making deliberate efforts to ensure that everyone was included. Conversations extended beyond meals into the walks between the hotel and school. Simple greetings in Thai, such as “hello” and “thank you,” were practiced during these daily routines. Together, these rituals created continuity between formal sessions and informal contexts, reinforcing the residency as a liminal learning environment that separated participants from everyday routines and placed them in new cultural surroundings.

Collectively, these physical, virtual, and cultural elements illustrate how the International EdD’s design creates an environment where context, curriculum, and community converge to support adult development and equity-centered leadership practice.

Participants

Participants were central to bounding the case, since the study examined the lived experience of doctoral students engaged in the International EdD program. Describing who they were, how many attended the residency, and the roles they held provides essential context for understanding how program design was experienced. The focus here is on aggregated demographic information and professional roles rather than individual identities, consistent with ethical commitments to confidentiality. Two cohorts of students, program faculty, and facilitators formed the case’s heart.

Cohort 4, in its final year of study, participated during the first week of the residency. Cohort 5, just beginning the program, participated in the second week. There was a two- to three-day overlap when both cohorts were present simultaneously. During this overlap, Cohort 4

planned an activity to introduce Cohort 5 to the dissertation process. A disagreement emerged among Cohort 4 members about how best to frame this introduction, followed by later reflection and apology. This episode was one of the few moments of visible conflict; otherwise, both cohorts consistently demonstrated cohesion and support.

Faculty and facilitators included core program faculty, guest facilitators, and support staff, as listed on syllabi. Their roles ranged from coordinating the overall residency to leading sessions or activities. Although I occasionally asked faculty clarifying questions about the intent of assignments or facilitation choices, these conversations were not treated as formal data but helped contextualize observations of the instructional design.

A consolidated demographic snapshot for the two cohorts present at the SLE is provided in Table 6. Table 6 shows that the residency brought together participants with varied roles and international contexts, enriching peer learning and shaping how opportunities were taken up during activities. With the context and participants established, the study also required a range of data sources to capture how the learning environment was experienced and interpreted. The following section outlines these sources and their respective roles in addressing the research questions.

Table 6

Demographic Overview of Cohorts 4 and 5

Cohort	*n*	Participant Gender	Countries represented	Professional roles
Cohort 4 (finishing, 2022–2024)	8	5 female, 3 male	United States	Principals/school administrators; district/central office administrators; teacher/teacher leader
Cohort 5 (beginning, 2024–2026)	11	All female	China, Taiwan, Uganda, United States	Educators and leaders (teachers, international educators, NGO leaders)

Note. Cohort 5, 11 participants attended the residency and were included in the observations; one admitted student did not enroll in any courses. Countries reflect participants' current professional locations, not nationality or country of origin.

Data Sources

Multiple forms of evidence were used to capture the case from different perspectives and to strengthen credibility through triangulation. Each type of data provided a distinct window into how students experienced the residency and how program design supported transformational learning. To illustrate the analytic rigor behind these sources, Appendix E provides a consolidated sample of the analytic products generated from them, including a codebook excerpt, coded passages, and an audit-trail snapshot.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Cohort 4 students during the SLE. Two group interviews and one individual interview were completed, scheduled during breaks or after class to respect participants' time. Prompts invited students to reflect on the learning environment, describe their experiences with feedback and critique routines, and discuss the program's emphasis on equity and its call to action. No interviews were conducted with Cohort 5 during the SLE; their perspectives are represented through observation notes, reflective memos, and artifacts.

I also attended the full two-week SLE and observed both formal sessions, such as Dynamic Mindfulness, opening circles, Focus of Practice (FoP) discussions, leadership inquiry workshops, and reflection rounds, as well as informal contexts, including shared meals, daily walks to school, and evening gatherings. Field notes documented participation patterns, interactional dynamics, and the physical environment. Each evening, I wrote analytic memos to connect observations with emerging patterns, tensions, or disconfirming cases.

Most observations occurred in group settings such as class discussions, collaborative activities, and cohort meetings. Because participants often spoke in shared spaces, it was not always possible to attribute specific comments to individual speakers. In such cases, observations

are presented as collective reflections rather than direct quotations. When an individual participant could be clearly identified, a pseudonym was used to preserve confidentiality. Field notes were taken *in vivo* during sessions to capture participants' language, tone, and interactions as they occurred, providing immediate, descriptive detail for later analysis.

Course-embedded artifacts created during the residency were collected or photographed. These included autobiographies, "I Am From" poems, emulation poems, reflections on endowed objects, stance images, Norigae, redesign sketches, and reflective prompts. Artifacts were logged by session and date in aggregate form rather than linked to individuals, protecting confidentiality while providing a record of learning processes.

Cohort 5 also produced reflective memos as part of their coursework, which captured how they were making sense of identity, belonging, and leadership in the program's early stages. These documents added depth to the observational record and offered insight into the cohort's initial meaning-making.

For Cohort 4, leadership development chapters from completed dissertations, along with their corresponding dissertation abstracts, were reviewed to track how participants documented their growth throughout the program. These texts provided a longitudinal complement to the more immediate data from the residency.

Additional sources included course syllabi, SLE syllabi, and historical program documents stored on the program's Microsoft Teams site, to which I was granted permission to review. These materials outlined program structure and pedagogy, offering background context for interpreting observed practices. Finally, I observed and reviewed WebExchange sessions before and after the residency. These synchronous online meetings created continuity across semesters and connected the SLE to the broader program arc. Together, these data sources

created a layered evidence base that supported triangulation across firsthand accounts, observed practice, designed curriculum, and reflective documentation.

Instruments and Protocols

Data collection relied primarily on a semi-structured interview protocol designed to explore participants' experiences of the learning environment, course-embedded opportunities, and the program's call to action. The interview prompts were organized around the three research questions, allowing for consistency across interviews while leaving flexibility for conversational depth and participant reflection. Each interview concluded with an open-ended invitation for participants to share additional insights or examples. The complete interview guide is provided in Appendix F.

Observations followed the daily schedule and course syllabi for each cohort rather than a prescriptive checklist. Prior to each session, I reviewed the stated instructional purpose, such as Dynamic Mindfulness, Focus of Practice discussions, or equity analysis workshops. I observed how participants engaged with one another and with faculty. Field notes documented timing, participation patterns, interactional tone, and nonverbal cues such as body language and group energy.

Artifacts created during the residency (e.g., autobiographies, stance images, and Norigae) were photographed and accompanied by analytic memos. Because these materials were collected in aggregate rather than linked to individuals, a formal artifact log was not necessary. The photographs and memos served as contextual evidence that supported triangulation across data sources

Inquiry Procedures

At the outset of the SLE, I explained the study to participants, distributed information sheets, and secured written or digital consent. Participation was voluntary, with clear assurances that opting in or out carried no academic consequences.

Data collection followed the natural rhythm of the residency. Each day began with Dynamic Mindfulness, led by a rotating student or faculty member, followed by an opening circle and a reflective or identity-based activity. Depending on the cohort and day, these included the autobiography assignment, the "I Am From" poem, the emulation poem, the endowed object reflection, the stance image, the Norigae, or other arts-based practices designed to help students situate their Focus of Practice (FoP) within their personal and professional histories. Morning and midday sessions then transitioned into coursework aligned with each cohort's stage in the program. Cohort V (Summer 1) focused on autobiographical and identity-based assignments, digital storyboarding, and introductory coding practice, while Cohort IV (Summer 3) engaged in program evaluation, data analysis workshops, PAR cycles, and dissertation milestones, including drafting and revising Chapters 4 and 5.

Afternoons and evenings often shifted to FoP discussions, peer feedback sessions, redesign work, gallery walks, and structured reflection rounds. Several evening sessions were held at the Cross Vibe hotel, where cross-cohort activities, poster sessions, and digital story sharing extended the day's formal learning into informal spaces. Artifacts created during these sessions were collected or photographed at the close of activities, logged in aggregate by date, and analyzed alongside observation notes and memos. Each evening, I wrote analytic memos to connect observations with artifacts and interviews, noting emerging patterns and disconfirming cases.

Semi-structured interviews were scheduled on a voluntary basis, with two group interviews and one individual interview conducted with Cohort 4 participants during the SLE. These conversations explored how participants experienced the learning environment, how they interpreted Focus of Practice assignments, and how they anticipated changes in their leadership practice. No interviews were conducted with Cohort 5 during the SLE, though their perspectives were represented through reflective memos, artifacts, and observational data.

Table 7 summarizes the core activities, and the evidence gathered each day to illustrate how data collection aligned with the residency's daily rhythm. Activities varied slightly between Cohorts 4 and 5 depending on program stage. Cohort 4 emphasized program evaluation, data analysis, and dissertation milestones (Chapters 4–5), while Cohort 5 emphasized identity and narrative-based assignments (autobiography, stance image, digital story, Norigae).

As Table 7 shows, the residency followed a structured yet varied sequence of activities that blended reflective practice, arts-based identity work, focus of practice development, and dissertation-related milestones. This design created natural opportunities for observation and data collection across modalities, reinforcing the cyclical rhythm of the program’s pedagogy: beginning with personal grounding, moving into collaborative inquiry, and concluding with synthesis and reflection. By linking observations, interviews, artifacts, and memos to specific days and activities, I could trace how participants engaged with both the formal curriculum and the informal learning spaces surrounding it. These patterns established the evidence base for the study, which required careful management and protection, as described in the next section.

Table 7

Day-By-Day Flow of Activities and Evidence Collected at the SLE

Day	Activity	Evidence collected
1	Opening circle, cohort introductions, problem-of-practice framing	Field notes, memos
2	Consultancies, design sessions	Field notes, artifacts, memos
3	Equity analysis workshops, peer review	Artifacts, field notes, interviews
4	Redesign sessions, reflection rounds	Field notes, memos, artifacts
5	Closing presentations, synthesis discussions	Field notes, artifacts, interviews

Data Management and Security

All study materials, including audio files, transcripts, photographs, digital artifacts, and analytic memos, were stored digitally on my ECU-supported Pirate Drive. Pirate Drive is protected by ECU's privacy and security features, including multi-factor authentication and password protection.

I kept observation notes and memos on my laptop for immediate access during the residency. These were later transferred to Pirate Drive for secure storage. Any paper notes I made were transcribed and uploaded digitally; the paper originals were then shredded.

Artifacts were logged and analyzed in aggregate rather than linked to individual creators, which provided an additional layer of confidentiality. Identifying information was removed from transcripts, and pseudonyms were used in all references to participants.

Following ECU's IRB requirements, all data will be retained for five years and then securely destroyed. At the end of the retention period, digital files will be permanently deleted from Pirate Drive.

Analytic Approach

Data analysis unfolded in iterative cycles, looping back as new evidence was collected and compared. I followed Saldaña's (2016) coding model, adapting it to reflect my positionality and long-standing engagement with the program. I moved through three stages: first-cycle, second-cycle, and theme development. Appendix E provides a representative codebook excerpt and coding process overview (with sample coded passages) corresponding to these stages. Each stage is summarized in Table 8, which outlines the analytic focus, key moves, and examples from the dataset.

Table 8

Analytic Cycles in Coding and Theme Development

Stage	Analytic focus	Key moves/examples
First-cycle coding	Line-by-line coding using theory-informed and emergent codes	Combined adult development codes with in vivo codes from transcripts, observation notes, and artifacts
Second-cycle coding	Clustering recurring codes into categories across sources	e.g., "circle check-in" + "mindfulness rotation" → Belonging scaffolds; "peer critique" + "gallery walk feedback" → Ritualized vulnerability
Theme development	Integrating categories into themes aligned with research questions	Synthesized categories into themes; tested against disconfirming cases; refined through analytic and reflexive memos

Note. This table summarizes the three analytic cycles, adapted from Saldaña (2016). Examples of the codebook, coded excerpts, and the hierarchical structure of codes appear in Appendix E (Codebook and Analytic Process).

I maintained a dated audit trail throughout the analysis, documenting coding decisions, category revisions, and theme naming. Analytic memos served a dual purpose: they tracked emerging patterns and surfaced my positionality as a researcher.

I include a sample excerpt from the codebook (Table 9) next to provide transparency without overwhelming the reader. This excerpt illustrates how initial codes were clustered into broader categories and then abstracted into themes aligned with the research questions. The examples are drawn directly from my coding of interview transcripts, observation notes, and artifacts. Because the full codebook is extensive, it is not reproduced here in its entirety. A larger sample appears in Appendix E to illustrate the breadth of codes, categories, and coded excerpts. The complete, dated versions that reflect development across cycles are preserved in the study's audit trail.

Table 9 illustrates how initial codes were clustered into categories and then abstracted into themes that addressed the research questions. This excerpt demonstrates the systematic progression from raw data to analytic claims. A larger sample is provided in Appendix E to show the breadth of codes and categories beyond this excerpt. Building on this analytic foundation, the following section describes the strategies employed to enhance the study's trustworthiness.

Table 9

Excerpt from Codebook: Initial Codes, Categories, and Themes

Initial code	Category	Theme	Example
"Circle check-in"	Belonging scaffolds	Learning environment fosters belonging	Daily morning reflections during SLE
"Peer critique"	Ritualized vulnerability	Collaborative routines build trust	Structured feedback in a consultancy session
"Equity worksheet"	Equity as praxis	Equity-centered opportunities prompt reflection	Identifying blind spots in school data
"Loop reflection"	Iterative learning	FoP work deepens through cycles	Redrafting problem statements across sessions

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Several strategies were employed to strengthen the study's trustworthiness. Triangulation was used so that claims rested on more than one form of evidence; observations were cross-checked against interviews, and both were compared with artifacts and program documents. Member checks were conducted informally during the SLE by sharing short summaries and clarifications with participants, allowing them to correct, nuance, or complicate my interpretations. An audit trail was maintained to document analytic decisions, including code revisions, category shifts, and theme naming, providing a record of how the analysis developed over time. Reflexivity was also central to the process: analytic and reflexive memos surfaced how my proximity to the program shaped interpretation, and value judgments were bracketed in field notes with explicit flags when my insider stance may have influenced coding or theme development.

I also sought to provide thick description of the setting, routines, and artifacts so that readers can judge the transferability of findings to other contexts. In addition, disconfirming cases were treated not as anomalies but as important counterpoints that tested and refined emerging themes. Together, these strategies enhanced credibility, dependability, and confirmability, ensuring that the findings presented in Chapter 5 rest on a transparent and trustworthy analytic process.

Positionality and Reflexivity

I came to this study as a scholarly practitioner with deep professional ties to the program. Having worked with the International EdD for over a decade, I brought insider knowledge of its design and an investment in its success. This proximity offered unusual visibility into program routines and artifacts, but it also carried biases and risks of over-familiarity.

My broader interest in this topic began with online education at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. I observed a recurring mismatch between what adult learners needed and how institutions structured online coursework. Initially, I imagined studying this phenomenon wherever I could find a compelling example. The International EdD became my focus not because it was the only possible site, but because it offered two unique advantages: I had long worked alongside the program and could study it closely, and it consistently stood out as an online program that seemed to avoid the transactional pitfalls I had observed elsewhere. I might have chosen that if I had encountered a similar undergraduate example. In this sense, the International EdD provided both a practical research opportunity and a powerful case through which to investigate how online course design can foster belonging, developmental growth, and equity-focused leadership.

To counter the risks of bias that accompany such proximity, I employed several reflexive practices. In field notes, I bracketed value judgments and flagged moments when my insider stance could have influenced what I observed. I also kept reflexive memos alongside analytic memos, using them to interrogate my own assumptions and to record how my dual role as researcher and practitioner might be shaping interpretation. In addition, I debriefed regularly with a colleague outside the program, who pressed on the categories and themes I was building. These strategies did not eliminate bias, but they made it visible, offering readers a more transparent account of how findings were constructed.

While positionality shaped how I entered and interpreted the field, it was not the only factor influencing the scope of the study. Every design carries inherent constraints, and the following section outlines the validity threats, limitations, and delimitations that frame the understanding of the findings.

Validity Threats, Limitations, and Delimitations

Every design involves trade-offs that shape what can and cannot be concluded. This study was deliberately bound to the International EdD's June 2024 Summer Learning Exchange (SLE) in Bangkok. That choice provided depth of context but limited the breadth of perspectives, and the findings speak to this residency. They are not intended to generalize to all programs or aspects of the International EdD.

Although I conducted only a small number of formal interviews during the SLE, these were complemented by extensive observation notes, many of which captured participants' words in vivo during sessions. The perspectives of Cohort 5 are represented through these observation records, reflective memos, and course artifacts, even though no formal interviews were conducted with them during the residency. Thus, while interview data are concentrated in Cohort 4, both cohorts contributed to the overall dataset through multiple forms of evidence.

Self-report data, whether in interviews or written reflections, may lean toward intentions or aspirations more than actions. To address this, I triangulated self-reports with artifacts and field observations. My insider role carried risks of bias, as long familiarity with the program could lead to over-interpretation of routines or assumptions about intent. Reflexive memoing and peer debriefing helped surface these biases, but they cannot be fully eliminated.

The study was delimited to the residency itself and to course-embedded opportunities for adult development and praxis. It does not claim to evaluate the entire program or to track long-term outcomes beyond the SLE.

Evidence Traceability

To make the analytic process transparent, Table 10 provides a crosswalk linking each research question to its primary data sources, analytic moves, and quality checks. This structure clarifies how evidence was triangulated across sources and how trustworthiness strategies were embedded throughout the study.

As shown in Table 10, each research question was triangulated across multiple data sources, analytic steps, and quality checks. This crosswalk clarifies how claims are supported by converging forms of evidence, as well as systematic strategies to strengthen credibility. To further situate the study, the following section details my role in the field and how I balance responsiveness with consistency.

Researcher Role and Responsiveness

My role during the SLE was that of a moderately participatory observer. I was present and visible in both formal and informal settings, but I did not assume a facilitation role. When asked logistical questions, I provided answers, but I did not intervene in instructional activities or guide discussions.

At times, participants invited me to share my own experiences. When this happened, I chose to participate briefly, offering personal reflections or vulnerability as a way of building rapport and honoring the reciprocity expected in community-based learning spaces. These moments were limited but important for building trust with each cohort and reinforcing that I was observing them and learning alongside them.

Table 10

Crosswalk: RQs, Data Sources, Analytic Moves, and Quality Checks

Research question	Data sources	Analytic moves	Quality checks
RQ1: How does the learning environment, characterized by its focus on local context, collaborative decision-making, and reflective practice, shape the transformational development of educational leaders?	Field notes from in-person observations (Cohorts 4 & 5), WebExchange observations, semi-structured interviews (Cohort 4)	Open and focused coding; clustering interactional patterns (belonging, trust, collaboration)	Triangulation across data types; thick description; reflexive memos
RQ2: In what ways do course-embedded opportunities (such as iterative reflection and data-driven decision making) contribute to adult development and transformative leadership practices among participants?	Participant artifacts (autobiographies, stance images, Norigae, equity worksheets), reflective memos (Cohort 5), field notes, interviews (Cohort 4)	Cross-source code clustering; category development; comparison across cohorts	Audit trail; peer debriefing; reflexivity memos
RQ3: How do participants interpret and describe the program's attention to equity, inclusive practices, and critical engagement with institutional norms as influencing their leadership and organizational improvement approaches	Semi-structured interviews (Cohort 4), artifacts and memos (Cohorts 4 & 5), observation notes from leadership inquiry workshops and discussions	Thematic integration; search for disconfirming cases; analytic memo synthesis	Triangulation; reflexivity; thick description

Note. Data sources included semi-structured interviews (Appendix F), artifacts, reflective memos, and observations of both in-person and virtual sessions. No formal observation guide or artifact log was used; syllabi and daily session purposes informed observations across cohorts.

As the study unfolded, I responded to what was emerging in the field. Analytic memos often highlighted patterns or tensions that suggested the need for slight adjustments. For example, when early artifacts emphasized equity considerations, I added interview follow-up probes to explore how participants made sense of equity within their Focus of Practice (FoP). At the same time, I worked to maintain the broader design of the study, ensuring that adjustments did not compromise comparability across data sources.

Responsiveness was also extended to protect participant time and comfort. I remained flexible in scheduling interviews, offering group or individual formats depending on participants' preferences, and respected requests to keep sessions short or meet during breaks rather than after long instructional days. This stance balanced my dual commitments: to gather robust evidence while honoring the intensive demands already placed on doctoral students during the residency.

Summary of the Chapter

This chapter outlined the methodological path of the study. I described the case design and rationale, the setting and participants, and the multiple data sources that created a layered evidence base. I detailed the procedures for collecting interviews, observations, artifacts, and memos, as well as the instruments and protocols that guided data collection. I also explained the analytic process, moving from theory-informed and inductive coding through categories and themes, and described the steps taken to ensure trustworthiness, reflexivity, and responsiveness.

Together, these choices were intended to balance rigor with respect for participants' time and context, and to make visible the analytic trail that links data to findings. The next chapter presents the results of this process: the themes that emerged from interviews, observations, artifacts, and program documents, supported by tables and figures that trace the evidence base.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative case study of the International EdD at East Carolina University (ECU). Guided by the three literature bins introduced in Chapter 2 — transformative adult development, online learning frameworks, and equity as rigor and praxis, the analysis illustrates how course design functioned as the decisive lever for transformational learning in this professional doctorate.

The findings are organized into two major sections. Finding 1: Design Anchors—Belonging, Trust, and Adult Development examines how structured reflection, dialogic routines, and cohort practices cultivated belonging and trust, stabilizing learners in community and supporting developmental growth. Finding 2: Design Activators—Praxis for Organizational and Systemic Improvement highlight how equity-centered design, including CLE-aligned tasks and community-rooted inquiry, reframes rigor as a justice-oriented practice and propels candidates to interrogate norms and enact systemic change.

Each finding begins with an analytic claim, presents converging evidence from interviews, artifacts, and program documents, and concludes with a brief design implication that foreshadows the interpretive discussion in Chapter 6. Together, these findings reveal how course design in the International EdD cultivated both stability and transformation: it anchored learners in trust and belonging while also activating their capacity to lead for equity and systemic improvement. Appendix G presents the code-to-finding crosswalk that links first-cycle and pattern codes to the final analytic categories and findings. It provides a visual summary of how evidence from interviews, observations, and artifacts was integrated to form these two overarching findings.

Finding 1: Design Anchors: Belonging, Trust, and Adult Development

The first finding highlights how the International EdD program intentionally created an environment where belonging and trust were not incidental outcomes, but essential conditions for learning and leadership development. This environment emerged from intentional course design, and it was through students' engagement that those structures became lived opportunities for trust and growth. Entering as whole persons, participants described being recognized in their vulnerabilities and building relational trust that supported risk-taking and growth. Over time, assignments and routines became sites where students practiced leadership in ways that deepened their sense of self, strengthened bonds with peers, and provided scaffolds for adult development. This finding is organized into three categories: (1) focus on self as the foundation of trust, (2) building trust and belonging with others, and (3) scaffolding and foundations for adult development. Together, these categories demonstrate how trust and belonging were intentionally designed and authentically lived, creating the groundwork for developmental practices that supported persistence, reflection, and the enactment of authentic leadership.

Three related categories make up Finding 1, illustrating how the program-built trust and fostered belonging, which served as the basis for adult growth, as shown in Figure 6. The first category focuses on self as the entry point into trust, the second highlights building trust and belonging with others, and the third illustrates how scaffolds support ongoing developmental practice. Together, these categories show how belonging and trust were intentionally layered to create the conditions for authentic leadership growth. Having outlined the categories that comprise this finding, the following sections examine each one in turn, beginning with belonging and trust as foundational elements.

Figure 6. Design anchors: belonging, trust, and adult development.

Focusing on Self as the Foundation of Trust

From the earliest days of the International EdD, assignments intentionally asked students to "begin with self." These activities—Mandalas, emulation poems, Norigae, and digital stories were not decorative side projects but foundational entry points into doctoral study. They surfaced the identities, values, and lived experiences that candidates brought into the program, and in doing so, laid the groundwork for a sense of belonging and trust within the cohort. Rather than asking students first to demonstrate compliance with academic tasks, the program signaled that leadership development begins with knowing oneself and being known by others.

This emphasis began even before the first summer residency. Before arriving in Bangkok, candidates submitted autobiographies and engaged in pre-session prompts that surfaced their educational histories, leadership values, and cultural backgrounds. These assignments introduced the expectation that self-knowledge is a starting point for doctoral work. Faculty extended this design during Summer 1, when sessions opened with structured activities such as the emulation poem, Mandala, and endowed object circle. These were framed through the program's use of *Ecologies of Knowing*, which emphasize that leaders must first understand themselves before they can serve organizations and communities (Guajardo et al., 2016). Evidence from both data sources, field observations of Cohort 5 during the 2024 residency, and document review of Cohort 4's 2022 SLE, shows that candidates engaged in parallel identity-focused assignments, reinforcing that self-knowledge was consistently treated as foundational across cohorts. Before examining the specific visual artifacts, it is helpful to note how often identity-focused assignments appeared across program syllabi.

Table 11 provides a frequency count of identity-focused assignments, including the *I Am From* poem, Mandalas, Shields, Norigae, endowed objects, and Digital Stories, along with their distribution across cohorts. These data demonstrate that identity work was not a one-time exercise but a recurring design choice, deliberately embedded in multiple courses and sustained over time. While a complete frequency count across both cohorts was not available, document review of Cohort 4 syllabi confirmed consistent inclusion of these assignments, and observations with Cohort 5 verified that candidates engaged in the same sequence. Assignments varied in form, sometimes individual, sometimes collective, but consistently reinforced that self-knowledge was both a personal and a relational entry point to leadership.

As Table 11 demonstrates, identity-focused assignments were intentionally sequenced across the three-year program, appearing before students arrived, during the first Summer Learning Exchange, and at multiple points thereafter. This continuity reinforced that self-reflection was not a one-time exercise, but a recurring expectation built into the doctoral design. Students described these activities as transformative, noting that the vulnerability required to share artifacts deepened relational trust. The assignments illustrate how course design consistently positioned identity work as the foundation for building community. The next section examines how these activities were implemented in practice, illustrating how artifacts such as the Mandala, Norigae, and Digital Story became tangible sites where self-understanding translated into trust and relational grounding within the cohort.

Table 11

Identity-Focused Assignments Across the Program

Assignment Type	Self / Group Focus	Typical Placement	Sequencing Role in Program Design
"I Am From" poem	Self (shared in group)	Pre-Summer I	Early autobiographical entry point
Autobiography	Self (individual submission)	Pre-Summer I	Establishes educational/leadership roots
Mandala (identity map)	Self, then shared	Summer I	Visual mapping of multiple identities
Shield (values/protections)	Self (shared in circle)	Summer I	Symbolic framing of leadership values
Norigae (symbolic object)	Self (shared in group)	Summer I	Embodied representation of commitments
Endowed object	Self (shared in circle)	Summer I	Collective sharing of personal meaning
Digital story (self/leadership)	Self (multimedia, group sharing)	Year 1–2 (courses + Summer II)	Multimedia synthesis of identity and practice
Leadership story / Message in a Bottle	Self (shared in group)	Later residencies (Summer II–III)	Reinterpretation and projection of leadership stance

Self as Foundation of Trust

Trust within the cohort did not emerge by accident; it was intentionally cultivated through course design that began with self. In this study, trust was first developed within the cohort community and later extended to the professional communities where participants led. Faculty emphasized that relational trust begins with self-awareness, an orientation practiced among peers that later transferred to participants' work with colleagues and co-practitioner researchers. Faculty framed self-knowledge as the necessary starting point for leadership, creating conditions where vulnerability and authenticity could be shared and validated. Across assignments, residencies, and reflective practices, students were asked to surface who they were—their histories, values, and commitments- as the grounding for how they would engage as leaders and peers. This emphasis established a cultural norm: before trust could take root, first within the cohort and later in participants' professional communities, it had to be anchored in knowing and articulating self.

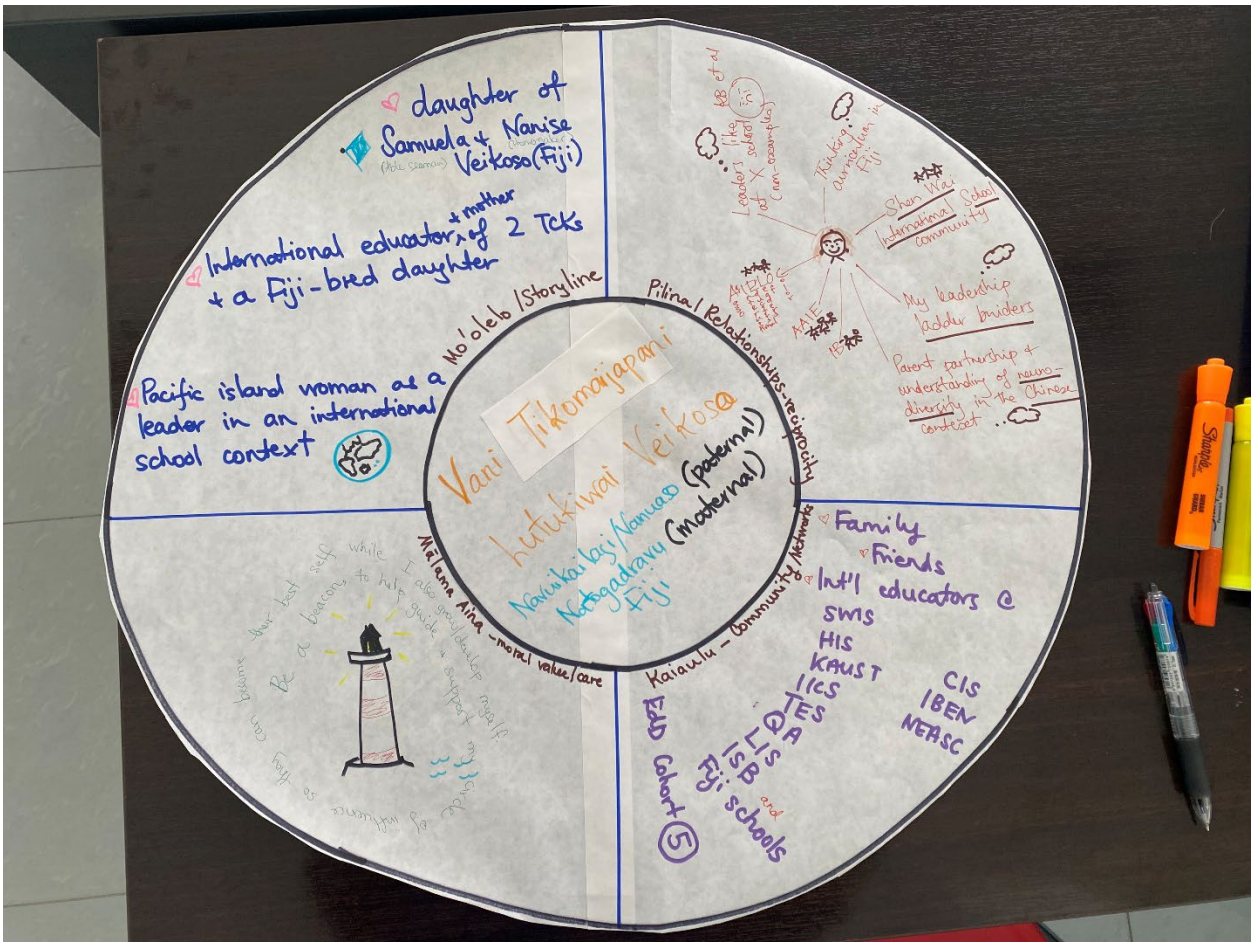
Identity Artifacts as Entry Points. One distinctive way this stance was operationalized was through identity-based artifact assignments. These artifacts invited students to represent themselves in visual, symbolic, and narrative forms, often using unconventional mediums not typical of doctoral coursework. From pre-program autobiographies and "I Am From" poems to mandalas, Norigae, and digital stories, each artifact opened a different lens for exploring identity. Together, they functioned as entry points into vulnerability, belonging, and authenticity, laying the groundwork for relational trust and signaling that leadership development in the International EdD began with knowing and sharing one's own story.

Mandala. The Mandala assignment was one of several early experiences that invited students to explore self as the foundation for leadership. Adapted from spiritual and cultural

traditions, mandalas have been used in education and psychology as tools for holistic self-exploration. Faculty framed the project to represent the multiple roles and relationships that shape leadership identity. Rather than writing descriptively, students were invited to "map" identity visually. Many drew quadrants: family, community, professional role, and aspirations; while others used symbolic motifs, such as trees or rivers, to convey heritage, responsibilities, and leadership vision. One Cohort 5 student reflected, "I'd never been asked to draw my leadership before. This made me realize there are so many parts of me—some I show at work, others I never bring into the room."

This different way of knowing disrupted familiar patterns of academic expression and opened space for authenticity. As another reflected, "Drawing my story reminded me that I'm more than a job title; I'm a mother, a daughter, and a learner. Sharing that mandala allowed my peers to see me in a fuller way." Faculty observations echoed this, noting how quickly the cohort shifted into empathetic listening and curiosity as students shared their mandalas. The assignment signaled that self-exploration was not ancillary but central, and that multiple ways of knowing, art, story, and reflection, were legitimized as scholarly practice.

By beginning with mandalas, the program emphasized that authentic leadership and relational trust start with a willingness to bring one's whole self into the learning community. Figure 7 shows an example of a mandala created during Summer I.



Note: Image used with student permission.

Figure 7. Example of student Mandala.

As the example shows, Mandalas invited students to map multiple dimensions of identity in ways that written description alone could not. This orientation to self was not a one-time exercise; it foreshadowed how reflection would continue to surface in different forms throughout the program.

Norigae. Whereas the mandala introduced students to visual self-mapping at the very start of the program, the Norigae assignment re-engaged identity work later in the journey. Introduced during the third Summer Learning Exchange (Summer 2024 for Cohort 4), it followed two years of coursework, reflective memos, and collaborative projects, when candidates were already shaping their leadership practices. Inspired by a Korean cultural tradition in which symbolic ornaments are worn on clothing, with charms representing protection, prosperity, or identity, the faculty framed the project as an invitation for students to materialize the values, relationships, and commitments they carried into leadership.

Although not all students made this link explicit, the timing of the Norigae after multiple cycles of reflection and practice meant that many drew on deeper self-understanding when selecting their symbols. One candidate from Cohort 4 attached three charms: one for her grandmother, one for her school community, and one for her equity commitments. She explained, "I never thought of my leadership in symbols before. The charm I chose for my grandmother is a reminder that I lead with her voice in my head." Another selected a small compass charm, noting it represented her desire to find direction as a leader "when the way forward isn't clear."

The process of creating and sharing Norigae often led to vulnerable storytelling. Observations recorded moments of laughter, tears, and recognition as students explained their choices. In small-group circles, candidates passed their Norigae to peers, offering one another words of affirmation and curiosity. As one reflective memo described, "We had never talked

about ourselves like this in a professional space. Sharing my Norigae felt risky, but it also made me feel seen."

Visually, the Norigae were striking, with many combined ribbons, beads, or charms with words such as *equity, hope,* or *courage.* One included a stone to represent endurance; another a feather to symbolize lightness and adaptability in leadership. These creative choices made leadership values tangible, sparking dialogue that connected personal stories to collective commitments.

As with the Mandala, the Norigae reinforced the program's culture: self-reflection was not episodic but an ongoing expectation. Students recognized that leadership identity was not fixed but continually shaped through relationships, symbols, and stories. By situating the Norigae later in the program, faculty underscored that authentic leadership grows from sustained attention to both self and community. Figure 8 shows a student Norigae, where symbolic charms represented family, commitments, and leadership.

As these examples demonstrate, the Norigae invited students to symbolize the values and commitments they carried into leadership, often sparking vulnerable storytelling and affirmation among their peers. This practice foreshadowed the program's culminating use of digital storytelling. Building on earlier artifacts such as emulation poems, Mandalas, and Norigae, students wove their narratives into multimedia form; first through Digital Stories of Self at the initial Summer Learning Exchange (SLE) and later through Digital Stories of Leadership Journeys at the final SLE.

Figure 8. Example of student Norigaes.

Digital Stories of Self and Leadership. The program's use of digital storytelling extended the trajectory of identity and reflection by moving into multimedia narrative. Faculty framed this assignment to integrate image, music, and voice into a coherent account of self and leadership. Students were tasked with creating short videos (3–5 minutes) that represented who they were and how they understood themselves as leaders. The assignment underscored the program's commitment to multiple ways of knowing, writing, art, symbol, and multimedia. By asking candidates to craft and share digital stories with peers in the cohort, the program extended earlier self-reflective practices into a communal act of scholarly vulnerability.

Digital storytelling was scaffolded across the three-year program in two phases: Digital Stories of Self, at the close of the first Summer Learning Exchange, and Digital Stories of Leadership Journeys, during the third. For Cohort 5, the emulation poem and Mandala completed early in Summer I served as springboards for the Digital Story of Self. Despite being a newly formed group, students shared intensely personal stories, accompanied by family photos, music, and narration, revealing their hidden aspects. Faculty noted the palpable empathy in the room: students laughed, cried, and listened intently to one another. As one participant reflected, "We had just met, but watching those stories I felt like I already knew my cohort in a deep way." In this way, digital storytelling functions not only as an artifact but also as a ritual of belonging.

Cohort 4 experienced both phases of digital storytelling. Their initial Digital Stories of Self mirrored Cohort 5's experience, establishing a culture of authenticity and empathy. One student explained, "I was nervous to put my story to music, but when I played it for my cohort, I could see tears in their eyes. They understood me in a way words alone couldn't explain." By foregrounding personal histories in multimedia form, the assignment created space for students to feel seen and for peers to respond with affirmation.

Two years later, during the third Summer Learning Exchange (Summer 2024), Cohort 4 created Digital Stories of Leadership Journeys. These projects represented progression from earlier artifacts such as Mandala, Norigae, and Messages in a Bottle. Scaffolded by reflective activities, students traced their growth and surfaced the commitments that anchored their leadership narratives. Presented at the close of the residency, the leadership journey digital stories served as a communal capstone to two years of inquiry and practice.

The stories themselves were layered with symbolism. One student repeated the phrase "Community is Life" throughout her video, interlacing it with images of classrooms and community events. Another juxtaposed protest marches with classroom scenes, underscoring leadership as both advocacy and care. Music choices carried deep meaning. One story was set to Bob Marley's *Coming in from the Cold*, evoking liberation, resilience, and hope. Taken together, the stories highlighted metaphors of rootedness (family and heritage), flow (community relationships), connection (bridges between past and future), and growth under pressure (resilience in the face of equity struggles).

Because digital stories are multimedia and highly personal, images still cannot capture their full impact. To represent recurring metaphors while maintaining anonymity, I created a composite visual that synthesizes symbolic elements from students' narratives. Figure 9 presents this synthesis, combining four natural symbols drawn from digital stories: redwoods (representing resilience and rootedness), a river (symbolizing adaptability and collective flow), a bridge (signifying connection across difference and time), and a seedling breaking through concrete (embodying equity, growth, and transformation under pressure).

Note. Figure created by the researcher with AI assistance (Sora), based on coded descriptions of participant digital stories. Symbols were selected to represent recurring themes and are not reproductions of individual student artifacts.

Figure 9. Symbolic representation of themes from digital stories.

Symbols include redwoods (representing resilience and rootedness), a river (symbolizing adaptability and collective flow), a bridge (signifying connection across differences and time), and a seedling breaking through concrete (embodying equity, growth, and transformation under pressure*)*.

Through both cohorts, digital storytelling reinforced the program's culture of authenticity by inviting candidates to share personal narratives that required vulnerability and evoked compassionate responses from peers. The progression from self to leadership demonstrated intentional scaffolding: the program first asked students to narrate who they were and later to articulate how they led. In this way, digital storytelling evolved into more than an assignment; it became a collective practice of belonging and leadership development.

Across these assignments —Mandalas, Norigae, and Digital Stories —were created intentional entry points into self-reflection. These artifacts reveal dimensions of identity; family, heritage, activism, and spirituality that are often left outside academic spaces, thereby inviting deeper relationships. By layering these assignments, the program cultivated trust through vulnerability: students felt seen, peers listened with care, and leadership was framed as inseparable from personal story. This dynamic sets the stage for the following subcategory, which examines how vulnerability became the foundation of relational trust.

Vulnerability and Relational Trust.

While the artifacts themselves were meaningful, their most profound impact came in how they were shared. Each activity, whether a Mandala, a Norigae, or a digital story, asked students to reveal something personal in a collective setting. The act of presenting these artifacts invited vulnerability, and the cohort's response shaped an environment where empathy, authenticity, and relational trust could take root.

For Cohort 5, vulnerability emerged remarkably early during their first Summer Learning Exchange. Despite being only weeks into the program, students reported feeling deeply connected through the combination of Mandalas, emulation poems, and digital stories. The poems provided language that carried into the stories, allowing students to narrate where they came from and where they were going. During the digital story activity, the atmosphere in the room was palpable. Students leaned forward as the stories played, eyes glistening and darting toward one another as if to confirm that it was acceptable to show the emotions they were experiencing. Nods, misty eyes, and collective attentiveness created a presence that went beyond academic exercise. Several students later conveyed to each other, although they had just met, that watching the personal stories made them feel as though they already knew their cohort deeply and meaningfully. Others described the moment as unusually full of empathy and care for a group so new. Shared laughter, tears, and attentive listening marked this as the first collective signal that authenticity was valued and safe.

Cohort 4, with its extended history together, demonstrated how vulnerability deepened into rituals of belonging. During their third Summer Learning Exchange, students created digital stories of their leadership journeys, looking back on two years of growth. Watching these stories together was described as a watershed moment, filled with joy, pride, and recognition of resilience. A playful but telling symbol of this closeness was the "crying napkin." One member of the cohort had attended a peer's wedding just before the SLE. During the week, he surprised her by pulling out a cloth napkin he had taken from the reception. Many in the group immediately recognized it, and the gesture quickly became an inside joke. As students shared their leadership stories and emotions ran high, the napkin was passed from hand to hand as classmates wiped away tears. Nearly every member used it not because the sessions were sad,

but because the reflections stirred such strong emotions of gratitude, pride, relief, and recognition of perseverance. By the end of the week, the group affectionately referred to it as the "crying napkin," and its circulation became both a playful reminder of intimacy and a symbol of how emotional honesty had become a norm among the cohort.

One of the clearest examples of how vulnerability was intentionally supported came through the cultivation of Gracious Space. The faculty introduced and modeled this practice daily, inviting students into circles of reflection and dialogue where listening, presence, and openness were emphasized. In both in-person and virtual settings, Gracious Space was designed to be both a spirit and a setting: a spirit of compassion, joy, curiosity, and humor; and a setting where hospitality, mindfulness, and inclusivity were deliberately built in (Hughes, 2004; Hughes & Grace, 2010). Students in Cohort 5 consistently described Gracious Space as a "grounding, inclusive, and safe space" that invited participation and alleviated anxieties at the program's start. For many, it became a place where it was possible to be "vulnerable and honest," sometimes with a "healing impact" that allowed them to move beyond difficult stories. Reflective memos noted that Gracious Space made it "okay to work with discomfort" and created conditions where participants could "exude compassion, joy, hope, curiosity, and humor." The faculty also emphasized its systems dimension: welcoming the "stranger," learning in public, and valuing multiple perspectives as gifts to the community. Through practices such as daily mindfulness, "surprise and delights," and endowed object circles, the program deliberately cultivated a culture of Gracious Space. Students observed that this intentional design quickly built trust and fostered a sense of belonging that they "never thought could be created in such a short time."

Program documents reinforced that relational trust was not an accidental by-product but a core principle of the International EdD's design. Across multiple semesters, syllabi identified

"relational trust and reciprocal learning" as foundational to effective teaching, learning, and leading [SP22, SS23]. The explicit goal of the very first summer course was to "cultivate relational trust as a cohort" [SS22]. Assignments in later semesters extended this expectation: for example, during Fall 2023, students were tasked with "identifying, nurturing, and cultivating relational trust" with their Co-Practitioner Research (CPR) groups as part of their Focus of Practice development [FA23]. Reflective memos required them to code their efforts to build trust, documenting both intentions and outcomes. In contrast, CPR meetings were designed to practice trust-building through storytelling, attention to place, and the sharing of assets and challenges.

In this way, vulnerability and relational trust were not only the environment in which students experienced them, but also the opportunities that the program intentionally designed. Cohort rituals, such as the crying napkin or the palpable empathy in a first SLE, showed what it felt like to be held in trust. At the same time, assignments and protocols, ranging from mandalas to endowed objects to CPR groups, provided structured opportunities for students to learn how to build and sustain relational trust themselves. This dual emphasis was critical: students were simultaneously participants in a community where trust was cultivated and apprentices learning the practices and tools for cultivating trust in their own professional contexts. While the program's call to enact such practices as part of leadership praxis is discussed further in Finding 2, the foundation was laid here, as students learned to experience relational trust as a condition for growth and to practice it as a method for inquiry.

Faculty framing of self as a leadership foundation**.** Faculty consistently framed self-reflection not as a peripheral activity but as the foundation of leadership learning. From the first Summer Learning Exchange, instructors signaled that assignments such as mandalas, endowed

objects, autobiographies, and digital stories were not “icebreakers”, but identity work tied directly to leadership. This framing aligned with the pedagogical approach of Community Learning Exchanges (CLEs), particularly the guiding principle that “learning begins with the self, then extends to groups and broader community” (Guajardo et al., 2016, p. xiv). Even when the phrase itself was not invoked, program documents and student reflections reveal that this developmental arc was consistently reinforced across summer learning exchanges and courses.

Faculty also modeled vulnerability alongside students, demonstrating that authenticity was expected of everyone. One Cohort 4 student recalled initially “watering down” her endowed object story out of nervousness and a lack of relational safety, only to return and share the “full story, allowing myself to stand exposed” after “a couple days of modeling from our instructors.” Realizing that faculty were willing to expose their own vulnerabilities helped her reframe openness as a form of leadership practice rather than weakness.

The faculty’s role in framing identity work extended to scaffolding the most vulnerable assignments. During the first *Digital Story of Self* in Summer 1, where students explored the cultural, political, historical, and biological influences on their identities, faculty provided prompts, modeled examples, and structured spaces for sharing. Students noted that although they felt hesitant at first, the scaffolding gave them the courage to narrate formative experiences that shaped their leadership stance. For instance, Priya’s story declared, “I am becoming a stronger bridge,” while Casey affirmed that “community is life” (Digital Story of Self, 2022). Others highlighted their commitments through simple yet powerful statements, such as “My students: brilliant and deserving” and “Citlalmina & Tajin: All children are precious” (Digital Story of Self, 2022).

By Summer 3, the focus shifted to the Digital Story of Leadership, which asked students to narrate their evolution as practitioner-researchers and facilitators of their Focus of Practice (FoP), co-practitioner research (CPR) projects, and Community Learning Exchange (CLE) activities. Students described these leadership stories as culminating acts of self-presentation, shared not only with peers but also with advisors. Imani concluded her digital story with, *"*Let's be honest, mountains can be moved, so I'm growing in my purpose to move mountains one mindset at a time," while also reflecting, "I must trust the process and I will continue to grow into my purpose as a leader who stays grounded in empowerment and liberation for my community that's rich with assets, although often underserved, underrepresented, and undervalued" (Digital Story of Leadership, 2024).

This framing often carried an explicit connection to equity. Faculty reminded students that authentic leadership required courage and risk, invoking metaphors like Congressman John Lewis's call for getting into "good trouble, necessary trouble." By situating identity reflection within the broader struggle for justice, instructors affirmed that self-awareness was inseparable from ethically-conscious leadership. Students echoed this connection in their dissertations: one noted that cycles of inquiry facilitated "mutual respect and trust that engendered a space of critical dialogue." At the same time, another emphasized that faculty guidance helped make relational trust a "cornerstone of beloved communities."

Through rituals such as the Mandala, Norigae, and digital stories, students came to see vulnerability not as weakness but as the foundation of relational trust. Cohort practices—whether playful traditions like the "crying napkin" or the shared attentiveness of the first Summer Learning Exchange—signaled that authenticity was both expected and supported. Faculty reinforced this message by framing identity artifacts as central to leadership learning rather than

peripheral “icebreakers,” affirming that openness was a scholarly stance. In these ways, students experienced belonging through one another’s stories and recognized that leadership development in the International EdD began with the courage to be known. As summarized in Table 12, these identity-focused practices cultivated trust through vulnerability and self-disclosure, creating the cultural baseline on which the rest of the program was built. This foundation was carried forward as a cultural norm, reinforced through cohort practices and collective routines that deepened belonging and sustained relational connection across the program’s design.

Building Trust and Belonging with Others

While students initially grounded their growth in self-understanding, they also emphasized that trust and belonging with others were essential conditions for development. Cohort peers and program structures created spaces where vulnerability could be shared, dialogue was honored, and collective learning was expected. Belonging was intentionally cultivated through collaborative routines and relational practices that positioned leadership as a shared endeavor. The following subcategories illustrate how this culture of belonging was enacted through peer collaboration, rituals that sustained connection, and shared commitments, revealing that leadership development in the International EdD was as much a collective journey as it was an individual one

Table 12

Self as-Foundation of Trust: Environment and Opportunities

Practice/Feature	Environment: Felt Experience	Opportunity: Structured Design
Autobiographies & Poems	Students felt seen as whole persons	Required early in Summer I syllabi
Mandalas & Endowed Objects	Shared vulnerability deepened trust	Introduced in Summer Learning Exchanges
Digital Stories	Helped cohorts witness growth	Required in Summer I and III syllabi
Message in a Bottle	Students recognized growth over time	Embedded in Summer Learning Exchange design

Peer Collaboration and Modeling.

Students consistently described the cohort itself as a central source of belonging and leadership learning. Leadership was enacted not only through assignments but also through the ways peers modeled, challenged, and supported one another. One participant recalled, “Gallery walks gave me a chance to show my early work and see how others approached it differently” (Maya, C4 interview). Another explained, “When I saw my peers presenting, I thought, if they can do it, I can do it too” (Casey, C4 reflective memo). A Cohort 5 student emphasized, “The cohort was my training ground for leadership—we weren’t just classmates, we were colleagues testing ideas together” (Imani, C5 digital story).

Program artifacts documented intentional structures for collaboration. Gallery walk assignments appeared across multiple semesters in collapsed syllabi; agendas outlined peer review routines; and residencies included collective rituals such as community meals. Observation notes recorded how students utilized cross-cohort mentoring to anticipate upcoming challenges and how feedback cycles helped normalize vulnerability.

Students often connect peer collaboration directly to their own confidence and growth. One participant reflected, “Sharing drafts felt risky at first, but when others gave feedback, it made me stronger” (Felix, C4 reflective memo). Another explained, “Cross-cohort mentoring gave me insight into what was coming next and how to handle it” (Jaden, C5 interview).

As summarized in Table 13, peer collaboration was embedded across assignments, residencies, and informal routines. Students consistently described it as both an academic structure and a developmental practice that built confidence, normalized vulnerability, and modeled leadership as a shared endeavor.

Table 13

Peer Collaboration as Environment and Opportunity

Practice/Feature	Environment: Felt Experience	Opportunity: Structured Design
Gallery walks	Normalized vulnerability; showed diverse approaches	Built into course assignments and Summer Learning Exchange syllabi
Cross-cohort mentoring	Anticipated challenges; peers seen as near-peer guides	Incorporated into peer learning groups and advising structures
Collaborative critique	Feedback built confidence; risk-taking supported growth	Embedded in WebExchange activities and residency peer reviews
Community meals & rituals	Strengthened bonds; sense of family and belonging	Included in Summer Learning Exchange agendas and residency design

Table 13 illustrates how collaboration was embedded in both coursework and cohort culture, positioning peer interaction as a consistent site for leadership practice. Yet, collaboration was not only about completing tasks together; it was deliberately structured through dialogic routines that deepened a sense of belonging and mutual accountability. The Community Learning Exchange (CLE) axioms provided a guiding frame for these routines, encouraging candidates to move from cooperation toward collective reflection and shared decision-making. In this way, peer collaboration cultivated both the confidence to lead and the trust to be led, setting the stage for the following subcategory on how rituals and cohort practices reinforced belonging across the program

Dialogic Structures through CLE Axioms.

Collaboration in the International EdD was intentionally deepened through dialogic structures anchored in the five Community Learning Exchange (CLE) axioms: (a) learning and leadership are dynamic social processes, (b) conversations are critical and central pedagogical processes, (c) the people closest to the issues are best situated to address local concerns, (d) crossing boundaries enriches developmental and educational processes, and (e) hope and change are built on the assets and dreams of local persons and their communities (Guajardo et al., 2016). Faculty embedded these principles into coursework, residencies, and peer exchanges so that they became not only guiding ideas but daily practices.

Students and faculty alike described these axioms as more than abstract ideals; they shaped the ways cohorts approached collaboration, problem-solving, and reflective inquiry. Observations from Summer Learning Exchanges documented students arranging themselves in circles, telling personal stories, and using protocols that required listening before responding. A Cohort 4 student explained, “We practiced equity every time we practiced listening” (Casey, C4

reflective memo), highlighting how dialogue was treated as a form of equity practice. Another noted, “Cross-cohort mentoring gave me insight into what was coming next and how to handle it” (Jaden, C5 interview), illustrating how boundaries between cohorts became opportunities for learning.

Students also emphasized how CLE routines made space for authenticity and belonging. Felix (C4) reflected, “I could share things here I never said in my own district,” underscoring how the axiom of creating sacred space for differences was lived out in practice. Digital stories and leadership narratives revealed how students anchored their growth in community commitments one candidate repeated the phrase “Community is life” throughout her video, linking hope and change directly to local assets and aspirations.

As shown in Table 14, the CLE axioms functioned simultaneously as cultural environments that students experienced and as structured opportunities that faculty embedded in residencies, syllabi, and inquiry cycles. In practice, they provided a shared grammar for collaboration that linked belonging, equity, and leadership development across both online and face-to-face contexts.

Table 14

Dialogical Structures Through CLE Axioms

CLE axiom	Environment: Felt experience	Opportunity: Structured design
Learning and leadership are dynamic social processes	Cohort experienced the program as a "training ground for leadership" where peers modeled and challenged each other (Imani, C5 digital story).	Built into collaborative assignments, gallery walks, and peer exchanges across residencies and online spaces.
Conversations are critical and central pedagogical processes	Students experienced storytelling and dialogue as equity in action: "We practiced equity every time we practiced listening" (Casey, C4 reflective memo).	Enacted through dialogue circles, reflective memos, and Digital Story assignments, where listening was as critical as speaking.
The people closest to the issues are best situated to address local concerns	Candidates grounded their inquiries in the challenges and assets of their own schools/districts.	PAR and CPR cycles required students to frame problems of practice and code trust-building efforts in their local contexts.
Crossing boundaries enriches developmental and educational processes	Cross-cohort mentoring provided students with insight into the challenges ahead and strategies for navigating them (Jaden, C5 interview).	Designed into Summer Learning Exchanges, cross-cohort activities, and the international residency in Bangkok.
Hope and change are built on the assets and dreams of local persons and their communities	Students anchored leadership narratives in family, heritage, and community commitments: "Community is life" (Digital Story, C4).	Embedded in assignments such as Message in a Bottle, endowed objects, and leadership stories that foregrounded community strengths.

Beyond their use in residencies, CLE axioms served as a golden thread woven throughout the design of the International EdD. They offered a way of thinking about leadership and problem-solving that emphasized reciprocity, shared authority, and collective responsibility. Related to the axioms, the Ecologies of Knowing framework encouraged students to value multiple ways of understanding personal experience, community wisdom, cultural knowledge, and formal research. Students came to see these ecologies not as competing sources but as complementary, which shaped how they engaged with their organizations and communities. This framing meant that leadership was consistently enacted as a relational practice: learning and leading in public, honoring voice, and drawing on diverse ways of knowing. Rather than treating dialogue as preliminary to "real work," the program positioned it as the work of leadership itself.

Peer collaboration and dialogical structures, rooted in the CLE axioms, were consistently described by students and documented in program artifacts as central to building trust and a sense of belonging. These relational supports allowed students to take risks, share vulnerabilities, and recognize themselves as part of a collective learning community. Dialogic routines such as storytelling, Gracious Space, and dialogue circles were embedded into coursework and Learning Exchanges, functioning as scaffolds that reinforced belonging and modeled equity as a lived practice. Importantly, these CLE processes were not only modeled by faculty but also taken up by candidates as their primary research design. Students later facilitated dialogue circles and other CLE routines in their Focus of Practice projects, demonstrating how the program's design translated into their own inquiry practice. In this way, Category 2 highlighted how belonging was positioned as a developmental condition rather than an incidental outcome of the cohort, foreshadowing themes that will re-emerge in Finding 2.

The next category examines how scaffolding for adult development was embedded into the program design. Faculty presence, reflective writing, authentic assignments, and iterative improvement cycles provided structured opportunities for growth, ensuring that adult learners experienced both support and stretch as they developed more complex ways of leading.

Scaffolding Adult Development

Category 3 turns to the structured scaffolds built on the relational foundation described in Category 2. The program's design recognized that adult learners cannot fully engage in developmental risk-taking without grounding their identity (Category 1) and experiencing a sense of belonging with others (Category 2). From this foundation, course structures layered technical and developmental supports that both organized doctoral work and acknowledged the needs of adult learners, balancing complex professional and personal commitments.

Scaffolding in the International EdD was deliberately sequenced to move learners from self to group to greater complexity. Evidence across interviews, reflective memos, digital stories, syllabi, and observations demonstrated that four scaffolds were consistently reinforced: (a) faculty presence as structural support, (b) reflective writing as a developmental practice, (c) enacting leadership through course assignments, and (d) iterative improvement cycles as developmental scaffolds. Together, these elements created holding environments that anchored learners while also stretching them to practice leadership in increasingly complex ways.

In addition to these program-wide scaffolds, the International EdD also experimented with individualized writing and research support models across cohorts. For Cohort 4, students were paired with dissertation coaches who encouraged and provided confidence-building feedback alongside formative writing feedback. While valuable for some, this model was costly and showed mixed success in strengthening scholarly writing. Beginning with Cohort 5, the

program transitioned to a research advisor model, embedding faculty within the teaching team and assigning each student a consistent advisor across the three-year arc. This shift offered more coherent academic guidance and integrated dissertation mentoring more closely with coursework, while the cohort itself continued to meet many of the program's relational and emotional support needs. Although distinct in form, both approaches reflected the program's recognition that sustained, individualized guidance was an essential scaffold for persistence, scholarly confidence, and doctoral success.

Faculty Presence as Structural Support

Faculty presence provided the first layer of structural scaffolding that built on students' self-exploration and the trust established within the cohort. Once candidates had articulated who they were becoming as leaders and had begun to experience relational safety, faculty presence offered the consistent guidance and structure needed to sustain adult development. Students emphasized that this presence was not limited to content delivery; rather, faculty functioned as developmental partners who balanced accountability with care. As one Cohort 4 participant explained, "Even when we were thousands of miles apart, I felt like faculty were in the work with us—commenting in Teams, jumping on quick calls, reminding us of the through-line."

Faculty credibility came not only from their coordination across courses but also from their lived experience as principals, district leaders, and system administrators. Students noted that this professional grounding gave weight to the insistence that authentic leadership begins with self. Instructors frequently connected theory to real dilemmas they had faced in schools, modeling how vulnerability, self-awareness, and ethical responsiveness converge in professional practice. This modeling sometimes drew on metaphors of courage and responsibility, positioning self-reflection as integral to ethical and context-responsive leadership. Program artifacts

supported these accounts. Collapsed syllabi showed that faculty coordinated across courses to align assignments and reinforce developmental themes, ensuring that students encountered reflective inquiry, analysis, and leadership practice coherently. Observational notes from Summer Learning Exchanges recorded faculty facilitating dialogue circles, modeling vulnerability, and weaving identity-based exercises back into discussions of leadership theory. Candidates noticed this intentionality: “They didn’t just tell us what to do; they showed us how to think about it and then walked alongside us while we wrestled with it” (C5 interview).

Faculty presence also reduced what Moore (1993) termed *transactional distance* in online learning by maintaining active contact across modalities. Students described faculty as “anchors” who bridged the technical aspects of course design with the relational needs of adult learners. A Cohort 5 participant reflected, “When I got feedback, it wasn’t just about the paper. They were asking what this meant for me as a leader, and that kept me from drifting into just checking boxes.” This blending of academic rigor with developmental care reinforced the holding environment (Kegan, 1994; Drago-Severson, 2009) necessary for adult learners to persist and grow. As summarized in Table 15, faculty presence functioned simultaneously as an environmental condition that fostered belonging and as an opportunity structure that advanced adult development.

Table 15

Faculty Presence as Environment and Opportunity

Practice/feature	Environment: Felt experience	Opportunity: Structured design
Faculty accessibility	Felt faculty were "in the work with us" despite distance	Maintained contact through Teams, calls, and feedback across modalities
Modeling leadership identity	Saw vulnerability and equity commitments enacted by instructors	Faculty drew on lived experience, courage and responsibility metaphors, and identity-based exercises
Course alignment and coherence	Experienced program as coherent and reinforcing key themes	Faculty coordinated across syllabi to align assignments and themes
Reducing transactional distance	Experienced faculty as "anchors" who balanced care with rigor	Faculty feedback emphasized personal growth as well as academic rigor

As Table 15 illustrates, faculty presence functioned less as distant oversight and more as a developmental scaffold. Coordinated syllabi, integrated assignments, and timely feedback anchored the technical aspects of course design, while facilitation routines and coaching addressed the relational needs of adult learners. This balance of structure and care created the holding environment for adult learners to persist, take risks, and engage in deeper self-reflection and leadership practice. In this way, faculty presence sustained persistence while fostering the developmental growth central to the International EdD.

Reflective Writing as Developmental Practice

Reflective writing functioned as a second scaffold for adult development, creating structured spaces for students to connect identity, leadership, and equity in ways that extended beyond technical course requirements. Candidates described reflective memos, journals, and digital stories as "turning points" where they were asked not simply to demonstrate knowledge but to interrogate assumptions. One Cohort 5 participant explained, "The memos made me stop and look at myself as a leader. I couldn't just turn in content; I had to wrestle with my assumptions." Another reflected, "Through the reflective writing, I started to see patterns in my decisions and how equity—or lack of it—showed up in my leadership" (C4 reflective memo).

Program syllabi reinforced this developmental function. In courses such as LEED 8030 and 8040, reflective writing assignments were explicitly tied to identity work and peer feedback cycles. Digital Stories produced in the first year asked students to narrate who they were becoming as leaders. Observations from Summer Learning Exchanges documented candidates presenting reflective writing alongside symbolic artifacts, signaling that these assignments were more than individual tasks; they were collective meaning-making practices. As one student

recalled, “Sharing my reflection in the group made me realize how much I was growing, and that I wasn’t alone in that process” (C5 interview).

Reflective writing also scaffolded persistence by normalizing revision and growth. Assignments were designed with iterative drafts, feedback loops, and connections to leadership practice. A Cohort 4 participant explained, “It wasn’t about writing it perfectly the first time. It was about putting it out there, getting feedback, and then seeing how my thinking changed.” Digital Stories reinforced this sense of transformation: one student narrated, “I am becoming a stronger bridge. Community is life.” These accounts show how reflective writing served both intrapersonal and interpersonal development, linking self-authorship (Pizzolato, 2003) to group belonging.

As summarized in Table 16, reflective writing functioned as both a developmental environment—where students experienced growth through self-authorship and peer validation—and a structured opportunity embedded across courses and learning exchanges. These assignments blended identity work, feedback, and leadership practice, making personal growth visible and revisable while reinforcing the developmental arc from self-awareness to equity-minded leadership.

Table 16

Reflective Writing as a Scaffold for Adult Development

Writing task artifact	Course/assignment design	Developmental purpose	Student evidence
Reflective memos	Regular assignments in LEED 8030/8040 with structured prompts	Connect theory to self and practice; surface assumptions	"The memos made me stop and look at myself as a leader." (C5 reflective memo)
Shared reflections	Presenting reflective writing in Teams or during SLE	Build trust through vulnerability; co-construct meaning	"Sharing my reflection in the group made me realize how much I was growing." (C5 reflective memo)
Digital Story	First-year identity assignment; third-year leadership capstone	Narrate self as emerging leader; connect professional and personal	"I am becoming a stronger bridge. Community is life." (C5 digital story)

Enacting Leadership Through Course Assignments

Assignments in the International EdD functioned as deliberate scaffolds for leadership practice. Rather than only analyzing leadership theories, candidates were consistently required to enact leadership in authentic contexts. Students emphasized that coursework blurred the line between classroom and workplace, pressing them to "practice leadership, not just study it." A Cohort 4 participant explained, "This program didn't just teach me about leadership; it made me practice it. Every assignment was a chance to try, fail, reflect, and try again." Similarly, a Cohort 5 student reflected, "By the end, I wasn't just writing papers. I was leading, facilitating groups, guiding equity conversations, and making decisions with others."

Program syllabi underscored this intentionality. Signature assignments such as context analysis, policy evaluations, and Community Learning Exchange (CLE) facilitation projects were designed as applied leadership tasks. Observations of WebExchange sessions showed students leading collaborative discussions while faculty monitored but rarely intervened, signaling that facilitation was a student responsibility. Artifacts such as collaborative reports and co-facilitated presentations reinforced this design: leadership was enacted through authentic performance, not simulated role-play.

Candidates described these assignments as high stakes but developmentally rich. One Cohort 4 student reflected, "Leading the equity audit was terrifying at first, but it gave me the chance to stand in front of my colleagues and say, 'Here's what equity looks like in our context.'" Another explained how repeated practice-built confidence: "It was iterative—facilitating, getting feedback, and then doing it again. That's when I started to feel like a leader, not just a student" (C5 reflective memo).

As summarized in Table 17, these applied assignments functioned as developmental scaffolds by positioning students as leaders in authentic contexts, requiring them to enact context-responsive practices, and engaging them in iterative cycles of practice and feedback. Designed as leadership enactments rather than abstract exercises, the assignments blended self-awareness, ethical frameworks, and peer collaboration to transform leadership from concept to habit. In this developmental holding environment, students practiced leading, received feedback, and tried again—normalizing growth as a continuous process rather than a one-time performance. These cycles of practice and reflection also set the stage for the program's broader emphasis on iterative improvement.

Iterative Improvement Cycles as Developmental Scaffolds

A final scaffold evident across the International EdD was its emphasis on iterative improvement cycles. Students described these cycles as "practice rounds for leadership," where assignments, feedback, and reflection were deliberately sequenced to support growth over time. One Cohort 4 participant explained, "Every memo, every draft, every WebExchange—it was all about doing it again, but better, with more awareness." Another reflected, "The revisions weren't about fixing mistakes. They were about learning to see differently each time I went back to the work" (C5 reflective memo). Program documents corroborate this emphasis. Context evaluations, policy analyses, and dissertation drafts all required multiple submissions with structured peer and faculty feedback. Collapsed syllabi showed how assignments in one course prepared students for more complex work in another, illustrating Argyris and Schön's (1978) concept of double-loop learning—revising both actions and the assumptions that guide practice. Observations of WebExchange sessions confirmed this dynamic, as students often reminded each other, "It's not about getting it perfect the first time—it's about learning in the process."

Table 17

Leadership Enactment Through Course-Embedded Assignments

Assignment type	Course/assignment design	Developmental purpose	Student evidence
Equity inventories	Conducted as signature assignments in leadership courses; required presenting findings to peers and community partners	Practice reflective, context-responsive analysis in authentic settings; develop confidence in public leadership.	"Leading the equity audit was terrifying at first, but it gave me the chance to stand in front of my colleagues and say, 'Here's what equity looks like in our context.'" (C4 reflective memo)
Policy analyses	Students analyzed real policies from their own districts and produced recommendations.	Connect leadership theory to systemic structures; learn to navigate power and policy.	"Every assignment was a chance to try, fail, reflect, and try again." (C4 reflective memo)
CLE facilitation projects	Students co-designed and facilitated Community Learning Exchange protocols during residencies and WebExchange sessions.	Position students as facilitators of collective dialogue and decision-making	"By the end, I wasn't just writing papers. I was leading—facilitating groups, guiding equity conversations, and making decisions with others." (C5 reflective memo)

As Table 17 illustrates, assignments were intentionally designed as leadership enactments that scaffolded developmental growth. By requiring students to lead peers, apply reflective and context-responsive frameworks, and integrate self-awareness into practice, coursework transformed leadership from an abstract concept into a lived, iterative habit. These applied tasks created a developmental holding environment where students practiced leadership in authentic contexts, received feedback, and returned to try again, normalizing growth as a continuous process rather than a one-time performance.

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Program design documents corroborated this emphasis. Context analyses, policy evaluations, and dissertation drafts all required multiple submissions with structured peer and faculty feedback. Collapsed syllabi revealed how assignments in one course prepared students for more complex work in another, illustrating Argyris and Schön's (1978) concept of double-loop learning: revising actions and the underlying assumptions that guide practice. Observations of group work during WebExchanges confirmed this dynamic, as students frequently reminded each other, "It's not about getting it perfect the first time—it's about learning in the process."

Improvement cycles were particularly significant for adult learners balancing professional responsibilities with doctoral study. Candidates emphasized that iterative practice fostered both patience and confidence. As one Cohort 4 student noted, “Improvement cycles gave me the patience to see leadership as long-term work.” Another added, “Getting feedback and trying again helped me realize I didn’t have to be a finished product to be a good leader” (C5 reflective memo). These reflections illustrate how the program framed leadership growth as a continuing process rather than a product. As summarized in Table 18, iterative improvement cycles functioned as developmental scaffolds by normalizing revision, embedding feedback loops, and sequencing assignments to increase complexity over time. Through these structures, the program reinforced that persistence and reflection were central to adult learning. Students experienced revision not as remediation but as an opportunity to see and act differently, embodying Argyris and Schön’s (1978) principle of double-loop learning. In this way, improvement cycles cultivated the developmental patience and confidence needed to sustain growth amid the demands of doctoral study and professional leadership.

Table 18

Iterative Improvement Cycles as Scaffolds for Adult Development

Practice/Feature	Course/Assignment Design	Developmental Purpose	Student Evidence
Multiple drafts of major assignments	Context analyses, policy evaluations, and dissertation chapters required resubmissions with structured feedback	Normalize revision as part of leadership growth; build developmental patience	"Every memo, every draft, every WebExchange—it was all about doing it again, but better, with more awareness." (C4 reflective memo)
Feedback loops	Peer and faculty feedback embedded across assignments and WebExchange sessions	Support reflection on both actions and underlying assumptions (double-loop learning)	"The revisions weren't about fixing mistakes. They were about learning to see differently each time I went back to the work." (C5 reflective memo)
Sequenced assignments	Syllabi designed assignments in one course to prepare for more complex tasks in later courses	Scaffold growth from technical practice to leadership enactment	"Improvement cycles gave me the patience to see leadership as long-term work." (C4 reflective memo)
Collective reminders	Students encouraged each other during WebExchange and residencies	Normalize growth as a process rather than a product	"It's not about getting it perfect the first time—it's about learning in the process." (C5 reflective memo)

Summary

The scaffolds of faculty presence, reflective writing, leadership enactment, and iterative improvement cycles created a developmental ecology for adult learners in the International EdD. These structures balanced technical course design with the relational and developmental needs of adults, reinforcing the program's intentional sequence from self to trust to complexity. Faculty presence anchored expectations, reflective writing nurtured self-awareness, assignments required authentic leadership enactment, and improvement cycles normalized persistence and revision. Students described these scaffolds as both demanding and supportive, emphasizing that they were consistently asked to stretch beyond content mastery toward identity work and reflective, context-responsive leadership. In this way, scaffolding functioned as "supports with stretch" (Drago-Severson, 2009), ensuring that adult development was not incidental but central to the program's design.

Closing Finding 1, the International EdD can be understood as deliberately constructing a developmental arc: students began with self-exploration, moved into relational trust and belonging, and advanced through structured scaffolds that supported increasingly complex leadership practice. However, a crucial question emerges: Do these scaffolds matter beyond enhancing persistence and personal growth? Do they cultivate praxis that can move beyond the classroom and into systemic change? Finding 2 addresses this question by examining how the program's call to action positioned ethical responsiveness as a non-negotiable stance. Here, the focus shifts from the scaffolds that anchor adult development to how candidates came to enact theory into practice through their own professional reflection and action, reimagining leadership and transforming their contexts.

Finding 2: Design Activators—Praxis for Organizational and Systemic Improvement

This second finding, Design Activators: Praxis for Systemic Change, describes how participants' developmental trajectories unfolded as they came to translate equity principles into leadership practice, ultimately systemic action. Participants engaged in coursework and inquiry processes that required them to navigate uncertainty, tension, and complex conditions, inviting deep reflection and experimentation with reflective, context-responsive leadership. Through course-embedded assignments, collaborative inquiry, and structured feedback loops, candidates were encouraged to engage discomfort rather than avoid it. Over time, these practices deepened participants' commitments and positioned equity as a lever for transforming organizational systems.

This developmental arc aligns most directly with Research Question 3, which examined how the program's reflective, context-responsive call to action inspired participants to challenge traditional leadership models and lead organizational improvement. At the same time, it builds upon the learning environments (RQ1) and opportunities for growth (RQ2) described in Finding 1: Design Anchors—Belonging, Trust, and Adult Development, which provided the relational grounding and developmental supports necessary for this equity stance to take root.

The findings are organized into three interrelated categories—Embracing Equity Leadership, Leading in the In-Between, and Advancing Systemic Change which emerged from participants' reflections and actions documented in the data. Refer to Figure 10 for an overview of the findings and their categories.

Figure 10. Design activators: Praxis for organizational and systemic improvement

Together, these categories show how participants developed their own capacity to translate personal commitments into collective and systemic action. Each stage represents a deepening enactment of equity: beginning with the personal stance of taking up equity leadership, moving through the tensions and ambiguities of practicing leadership amid complexity, and culminating in the translation of these commitments into systemic change.

In the sections that follow, each category is explored in turn to illustrate how participants enacted equity praxis as expressed through participants' reflections and leadership work. The first category, Embracing Equity Leadership, describes how participants began to position equity as a personal and professional stance, recognizing it not as an abstract ideal but as the foundation of how they came to define and enact leadership.

Embracing Equity Leadership

Participants described that equity was not experienced as an isolated course or optional theme in the International EdD. Instead, they perceived it as a threshold stance embedded across program design, woven into assignments, residencies, and dissertation work. Students consistently emphasized that attention to fairness, context, and inclusion was not an "add-on" but a throughline that shaped their understanding of what doctoral-level leadership required—sustained reflection on how educational practice affects diverse learners and communities.

Equity Embedded as Threshold Stance

Program artifacts reinforced this intentional design. Course syllabi referred to themes of leadership, fairness, and inquiry as core to professional responsibilities. Course syllabi referenced themes of leadership, fairness, and inquiry as central to professional responsibility. A university pledge cited in program materials encouraged leaders to examine existing policies and practices for patterns of inequity and to pursue continuous improvement toward fairness and

inclusion. Participants described that attention to fairness and inclusion was woven throughout their coursework and program experiences, such that it could no longer be treated as an abstract topic. One Cohort 4 student explained, “Fall 2022 equity coursework helped me to refine my equity lens and strengthen my stance. Noticing and naming equity and inequity moments has become part of who I am as a leader.” Another captured this shift in a digital story: “I am in a place where I can no longer stay silent in the face of injustice… where the cost of speaking up is no longer of consequence.” Others acknowledged how unsettling this process could be. A reflective memo admitted, “I need to be open to ‘becoming’ someone else, and to many more ideas and ways of being I have not yet imagined. It is not easy.”

Crossing this threshold often disrupts earlier leadership habits. One student reflected, “Initially, my leadership practice was driven by external pressures… I lived in absolutes. Through the coursework, I shifted toward a more collaborative, equity-centered leadership model, one that embraces street data, curiosity, reflection, and ambiguity.” In participants’ accounts, the program’s structure created conditions for these threshold moments. In these points, attention to fairness and inclusion evolved from topic to stance, prompting personal and professional reorientation.

Equity in Leadership Identity

Participants’ reflections suggested that attention to equity gradually became woven into how they defined themselves as leaders. One participant noted, “Noticing and naming equity and inequity moments has become part of who I am as a leader.” Another described this shift as a narrative transformation: “A new narrative has begun to take hold, causing staff to question the entrenched practice of the 1:1 and to question the way instructional assistants have been left out of meetings, planning sessions, and marginalized.” Digital storytelling assignments, Mandalas,

and Norigae, provided symbolic means for participants to express their developing leadership identities and values. In these stories and art, many framed leadership as connecting people and communities through commitments to fairness, care, and social responsibility, and One digital story, titled “Bridges”, narrated leadership as building connections across people and contexts through attention to social and environmental justice. Another participant described leadership identity as rooted in a family legacy of cultural integration and “a commitment to radical social and environmental justice.” A third embraced the metaphor of an “equity warrior” after learning an Indigenous framing of warriors as those who sacrifice for and care for others, especially children. Residency observations confirmed that identity formation was not only an individual process but also a collective one. Faculty modeled collaborative and reflective leadership through co-facilitation, and cohort routines such as circle seating and Gracious Space were used to promote trust, reciprocity, and inclusive participation. Participants frequently described these experiences as reinforcing shared responsibility and mutual care within the cohort. From participants’ perspectives, these overlapping structures created conditions in which attention to fairness, inclusion, and collective growth became integral to how leadership identity was enacted.

CLE Axioms as Golden Thread

The Community Learning Exchange (CLE) axioms also appeared as a consistent influence on how students experienced these threshold moments. Program documents and observations revealed that the axioms were not confined to residencies but were evident across coursework and collaborative assignments. For example, the axiom that “the people closest to the issues are best positioned to discover solutions” was echoed in students’ descriptions of anchoring their projects in local contexts. Likewise, the axiom that “conversations are critical

and central pedagogical processes" resonated in students' reflections on equity as something enacted through dialogue, storytelling, and collective meaning-making. These touchpoints suggest that the CLE axioms functioned as a golden thread, shaping how candidates perceived equity not as a technical requirement but as a relational stance that informed their leadership identity.

Summary

Together, these accounts demonstrate that crossing the threshold of equity was not merely a matter of mastering a body of knowledge. Across student voices, program artifacts, and observations, equity emerged as a fundamental shift in stance and identity. It became both the foundation and the filter through which students understood their leadership practice, preparing them for the unsettled collaborative spaces explored in the following category.

Leading in the In-Between

Across observations and participant accounts, equity was not treated as an add-on but functioned as a threshold stance evident throughout the International EdD experience. This stance operated less as a discrete topic and more as a developmental condition shaping belonging, trust, and growth. Building on that foundation, participants entered what they described as *the in-between*—transitional spaces where outcomes were uncertain and leadership practices were tested in real-time. Within these spaces, participants navigated ambiguity, negotiated multiple perspectives, and learned to lead without relying on predetermined scripts or hierarchical authority. This category examines how candidates demonstrate leadership in those in-between moments characterized by uncertainty, experimentation, and shared responsibility. Four recurring patterns emerged: (a) navigating uncertainty in collaborative inquiry, (b) enacting leadership through course-embedded assignments, (c) stretching through feedback and iteration,

and (d) holding space for collective sense-making. Together, these subcategories illustrate how ambiguity became a productive site for leadership growth, positioning candidates to engage with complexity rather than avoid it.

Navigating Uncertainty in Collaborative Space

Collaborative inquiry required candidates to relinquish the comfort of predetermined answers. Group projects, co-practitioner research (CPR), and Community Learning Exchanges (CLEs) demanded patience with ambiguity and a willingness to construct meaning collectively. These activities reflected the CLE axiom that conversations are central pedagogical processes, reminding students that inquiry was as much about dialogue as it was about solutions. The process initially unsettled many candidates but ultimately helped them view leadership not as the exercise of control, but as a reflective and ethically responsive practice of navigating complexity.

Brooke reflected in her memo, “At first, it was uncomfortable not having the answer. I am used to being the one who knows. However, here, we had to slow down, listen, and figure it out together.” Maya (C5) described a similar tension: “The faculty didn’t hand us the steps. They gave us the tools, and then it was up to us to negotiate what came next. That was hard—but it was also real leadership.”

Nolan’s digital story emphasized how this work reshaped his understanding of leadership: “I realized leadership wasn’t about controlling the process but about holding space for the process.” Brooke added, “I had to stay in the uncertainty long enough to see that others had insights I missed.” Maya echoed in her digital story, “It was the first time I experienced leadership as something we build together, not something I deliver.”

Program syllabi reinforced this stance, noting that “action research is inquiry that is done by or with insiders to an organization or community, but never to or on them” (Syllabus, Spring

2025). Observations revealed that faculty members often withheld immediate answers, modeling patience with the unfolding processes. Together, these accounts reveal how navigating uncertainty in collaborative inquiry created a developmental space where candidates practiced distributed leadership oriented toward fairness, reflection, and community responsibility. As summarized in Table 19, assignments were designed as leadership enactments that scaffolded growth by positioning students as facilitators of equity audits, policy analyses, and Community Learning Exchange projects. Coursework invited candidates to lead in authentic contexts rather than study leadership from a distance, reinforcing that leadership develops through repeated cycles of practice, feedback, and reflection. The next section examines how this iterative emphasis became a scaffold for normalizing revision, deepening reflection, and building confidence in leadership practice.

Enacting Leadership through Assignments

Based on participant reflections and my observations, assignments in the International EdD were not routine demonstrations of knowledge. However, they appeared as deliberately designed opportunities to enact leadership in authentic, real-time contexts. Candidates consistently noted that coursework was directly connected to their professional roles, blurring the boundary between the classroom and the workplace. This design made assignments feel weighty and consequential, offering a safe yet challenging space to practice reflective and context-responsive leadership**.** Félix explained, “Every paper wasn’t just about a grade. It was about how I was going to show up as a leader the next day at work” (Interview). Maya reinforced this in her reflective memo: “I wasn’t just writing about theory. I used the theory to figure out what to do with my team. That made it real.” These reflections illustrate how coursework became a vehicle for leadership enactment rather than a proxy for future performance

Table 19

Enacting Leadership through Course Assignments

Data source	Illustrative evidence	Observed leadership practice
Brooke (memo)	"At first it was uncomfortable not having the answer… we had to slow down, listen, and figure it out."	Relinquishing control; slowing down for collective process
Maya (memo)	"The faculty didn't hand us the steps… we had to negotiate what came next."	Negotiating next steps collaboratively
Nolan (digital story)	"I realized leadership wasn't about controlling the process but about holding space for the process."	Holding open process space
Brooke (memo)	"I had to sit with the messiness long enough to see that others had insights I missed."	Valuing others' perspectives in uncertainty
Maya (digital story)	"It was the first time I experienced leadership as something we build together, not something I deliver."	Building leadership collectively
Program syllabus (2025)	"Action research is inquiry that is done by or with insiders… but never to or on them."	Grounding inquiry in a participatory stance

Digital stories further demonstrated how assignments stretched candidates' leadership identities. Nolan recalled, "Through the PAR process, I practiced being a leader who listens, who doesn't have to know everything but can guide others." Imani (C5) described a peer facilitation assignment: "It forced me out of my comfort zone. I had to step into the role, and it turned out to be exactly the kind of leadership I want to model." These accounts highlight how structured coursework created space for experimentation, requiring students to test and refine new ways of leading.

Program documents indicated that this approach was intentional. Collapsed syllabi showed integration of leadership identity papers, data analyses, and policy reviews across courses, supporting an iterative and contextually grounded approach to leadership practice. Assignments reflected the CLE axiom that learning and change are rooted in relationships, requiring students to anchor their academic work in the relational contexts of their schools and organizations. Observations of assignment reviews showed that faculty framed coursework as rehearsal spaces where missteps were reframed as learning, positioning assignments as sites where leadership was enacted and developed in practice. As summarized in Table 20, these assignments functioned as enactments of leadership rather than routine academic tasks. Participants described how ongoing feedback and revision cycles deepened this work, pushing them to question assumptions, refine their approaches, and strengthen what they described as their equity-focused practice. The following section, *Stretching through Feedback and Iteration,* examines how these cycles of critique and reflection served as scaffolds for continuous developmental growth.

Table 20

Assignments Illustrating Participants' Equity-Oriented Leadership

Data source	Representative evidence (shortened excerpt)	Leadership practice illustrated	Course design feature
Student reflection memo	"Through the PAR process, I practiced being a leader who listens…" (Nolan)	Practicing relational, equity-oriented leadership	PAR cycles embedded in coursework
Digital story	"It forced me out of my comfort zone… exactly the kind of leadership I want to model." (Imani, C5)	Testing leadership identity through discomfort	Peer facilitation assignment
Program document	Collapsed syllabi integrated leadership identity papers, context analysis, and policy evaluation.	Iterative, contextualized enactment of leadership	Sequenced assignments across courses
Observation	Faculty framed coursework as "rehearsal spaces where failure was reframed as learning."	Risk-taking as liminal practice	Assignment review sessions, faculty framing

Stretching Through Feedback and Iteration

Feedback was a defining feature of the International EdD, framed not as correction but as a developmental stretch, an intentional push beyond comfort zones that created space for growth in leadership practice. Candidates were expected to share drafts, invite critique, and return with revisions, often multiple times. The process was demanding, but students recognized that iteration was a central mechanism for growth in both scholarship and leadership.

Brooke explained, "You had to put your work out there knowing it wasn't perfect, hear the critique, and then go back in. At first it stung, but later I realized that's what stretched me" (Interview). Felix echoed this insight: "Faculty didn't let us stay at the surface. Their comments always pushed us to go deeper—to connect equity, context, and practice together" (Memo). Maya (C5) reflected, "I had to rewrite, rethink, and reframe more times than I can count. It forced me to slow down and really examine my assumptions, not just polish the product."

Digital stories further showed how iterative feedback reshaped participants' sense of leadership. Nolan noted, "Through the PAR process, I came to see iteration not as failure but as part of becoming a stronger, more reflective leader." Imani added, "It was scary to show my half-formed ideas, but that's where the breakthroughs happened. Their feedback helped me see myself differently as a leader" (Digital story).

Program syllabi reinforced these expectations, outlining peer review cycles and course structures that embedded feedback across semesters. Observations of WebExchanges showed faculty modeling iterative learning themselves, signaling that vulnerability in revision was an essential element of leadership practice. Feedback cycles also reflected the CLE axiom that learning and change occur through collective engagement, as growth emerged through dialogue with peers and faculty rather than in isolation. From my observations and participants'

reflections, these practices appeared to reframe iteration as a core component of developmental growth within the program.

As summarized in Table 21, feedback and iteration stretched candidates' leadership practice and reinforced equity-oriented growth. While these cycles supported individual development, participants also emphasized the power of collective contexts for meaning-making, a theme explored in the next subsection.

Holding Space for Collective Sense-Making

While individual growth mattered, some of the most powerful learning occurred when cohorts paused to make sense of complexity together. These shared spaces—WebExchanges, CLE circles, and CPR discussions—were intentionally structured to center dialogue over answers. Participants described viewing equity as a shared responsibility rather than an individual stance. Participants described learning that leadership involved creating conditions for collective meaning-making rather than providing immediate solutions.

Felix recalled, "There were times when I didn't have the answer and didn't need to. My role was to help us hold the question long enough until we could hear each other" (Interview). Maya wrote, "It was messy, but we kept coming back to the table. Slowly, meaning started to emerge that none of us could have named alone" (Memo). Brooke reflected that the program taught her leadership was not about rushing to solutions but about "creating the space where everyone's voice matters, and that's when the real insights come" (Memo).

Table 21

Stretching Through Feedback and Iteration

Data source	Illustrative evidence	Observed leadership practice
Brooke (interview)	"You had to put your work out there… At first it stung, but later I realized that's what stretched me."	Taking risks and embracing critique
Felix (memo)	"Faculty didn't let us stay at the surface… their comments always pushed us deeper."	Connecting equity, context, and practice
Maya (memo)	"I had to rewrite, rethink, and reframe… it forced me to really consider my assumptions."	Slowing down to examine assumptions
Nolan (digital story)	"Iteration wasn't failure but part of becoming a different kind of leader."	Reframing iteration as growth in leadership
Imani (digital story)	"It was scary to show my half-formed ideas, but that's where the breakthroughs happened."	Vulnerability as a pathway to leadership growth
Program syllabi	Peer review cycles and collapsed syllabi reinforced feedback as an iterative stance.	Embedding iteration structurally in coursework

Digital stories reinforced this collective orientation. Nolan shared, “I used to think leadership was speaking first and loudest. Now I see it’s also about listening deeply, leaving room for silence, and letting others’ words reshape my own.” Imani added, “We built knowledge together. It wasn’t mine or theirs—it became ours.” Across these accounts, participants portrayed leadership as a relational practice, intentionally holding open space where shared understanding could develop.

Program syllabi and CLE axioms reflected this stance, reminding students that “the people closest to the issues are best positioned to discover solutions” (Guajardo et al., 2016). This principle offered a framework for collaborative problem-solving and underscored that effective leadership involves convening dialogue that amplifies the voices of those most affected. Observations of cohort discussions showed faculty stepping back to let students facilitate, positioning themselves as conveners of collective sense-making.

As summarized in Table 22, participants demonstrated this approach by holding space for shared reflection and dialogue. While feedback and assignments stretched individual growth, collective sense-making revealed the relational dimension of leadership—how participants navigated uncertainty together and built understanding through conversation. Collectively, these patterns illustrate how participants enacted reflective and community-centered leadership through uncertainty, iteration, and shared inquiry, setting the stage for the systemic enactments explored in the next category.

Table 22

Holding Space for Collective Sensemaking

Data Source	Illustrative Evidence	Observed Leadership Practice
Felix (interview)	"There were times when I didn't have the answer and didn't need to. My role was to help us hold the question long enough until we could hear each other."	Facilitating dialogue without rushing to solutions
Maya (memo)	"It was messy, but we kept coming back to the table. Slowly, meaning started to emerge that none of us could have named alone."	Returning to dialogue; building meaning collectively
Brooke (memo)	"Leadership isn't about rushing to solutions. It's about creating the space where everyone's voice matters…"	Centering every voice in decision-making
Nolan (digital story)	"I used to think leadership was speaking first and loudest. Now I see it's also about listening deeply, leaving room for silence…"	Practicing listening and making space for others' voices
Imani (digital story)	"We built knowledge together. It wasn't mine or theirs—it became ours."	Co-constructing collective wisdom
Program syllabi & CLE axioms	"The people closest to the issues are best positioned to discover solutions" (Guajardo et al., 2016).	Positioning equity through shared, relational inquiry

Summary

Viewed as a whole, these subcategories illustrate that participants experienced the International EdD as creating spaces where principles of fairness, collaboration, and shared responsibility were practiced in real time. Candidates described how collaborative inquiry required them to sit with uncertainty, how assignments blurred boundaries between coursework and professional roles, and how collective sense-making fostered shared understanding. Across these contexts, three leadership practices stood out: facilitating dialogue with patience, ensuring that every voice was heard, and co-constructing knowledge through reflective, inquiry-based practice.

Engaging in these complex, evolving contexts marked a critical developmental step. Participants learned to navigate uncertainty without retreating to easy answers, strengthening their ability to carry forward these reflective and inclusive practices into broader systems of leadership—the focus of the following category.

Advancing Systemic Change

Where the previous category highlighted how students practiced leadership through inquiry, feedback, and collective sense-making, this final category examines how those practices extended into systemic action. Candidates described a shift from learning equity as a threshold stance (Category 1) and practicing it in dynamic, evolving contexts (Category 2) to enacting it outwardly in their schools, districts, and organizations. Moving toward systemic change required participants to translate personal and program-based learning into action within their professional settings, treating equity not only as a personal commitment but also as a shared responsibility within their educational communities.

Translating Equity Stance into Systemic Leadership

Having internalized equity as a core professional ethic, candidates began applying that stance within their own educational contexts. What had once appeared in reflective memos or classroom dialogue increasingly became a guiding principle for decision-making, supervision, and organizational practice. Brooke described how her role as a principal changed: "I couldn't go back to business as usual. Every decision—from hiring to discipline—had to be filtered through an equity lens. Once you see it, you can't unsee it" (Interview). Maya (C5) echoed this in her reflective memo: "At first, equity felt like a course topic. Now it's my framework for leading staff meetings, for designing professional development, for everything. It's not just part of my job—it is my job." These reflections suggest that participants moved from treating equity as an academic idea to enacting it as a defining feature of authentic leadership practice.

Digital stories further demonstrate how candidates applied this stance systematically. Nolan explained, "I started calling out policies that looked neutral but were hurting certain groups of students. Before, I would have stayed quiet. Now I see my role as making the invisible visible—and pushing my colleagues to change it" (Digital story). Imani described leading as accountability: "The program didn't just give me tools; it gave me the expectation. My community deserves leadership that names inequity and acts on it. I can't walk away from that" (Digital story).

Program structures appeared to support this translation of learning into professional practice. Course syllabi encouraged students to situate assignments within their organizational contexts, linking academic analysis to live focus of practice. Observations of WebExchanges showed faculty prompting candidates to reflect on how course concepts might apply in their

districts or agencies. These design features blurred the line between coursework and professional leadership, allowing participants to test ideas in their authentic settings.

As summarized in Table 23, participants described translating their equity stance into systemic leadership practice, moving from understanding equity as a personal commitment to enacting it as a shared organizational responsibility. In participants' accounts, equity became a marker of leadership credibility within their professional contexts, as they positioned themselves as accountable for identifying and addressing systemic barriers.

The following subsection, *"Equity as a Lever for Systemic Change," examines how participants extended this stance by utilizing* inquiry and data-driven processes to foster more inclusive and responsive organizational practices.

Inquiry as a Lever for Systemic Change

Participants described carrying the ethical and reflective stance they had developed into their workplaces using the program's inquiry tools to question and improve institutional practices. Participatory Action Research (PAR/PAR), context analysis, and policy reviews, initially structured as course assignments, become levers for systemic change when applied in schools, districts, and community organizations. Inquiry extended beyond formal research methods to include Community Learning Exchange (CLE) protocols that had been modeled throughout the program. Over time, these routines were co-created with faculty coaches or research advisors and adapted as data-collection strategies within students' Focus of Practice projects. In this way, inquiry functioned as both a technical and a dialogic process, grounded in collaboration and collective knowledge-building.

Table 23

Translating Equity Stance into Systemic Leadership

Data source	Illustrative evidence	Observed leadership practice
Brooke (interview)	"Every decision—from hiring to discipline—had to be filtered through an equity lens."	Applying equity lens systematically in decision-making
Maya (memo)	"At first equity felt like a course topic. Now it's my framework for… everything."	Making equity the foundation of daily leadership
Nolan (digital story)	"I started calling out policies that looked neutral but were hurting certain groups…"	Identifying inequitable policies and advocating change
Imani (digital story)	"My community deserves leadership that names inequity and acts on it."	Leading with accountability to equity commitments
Program syllabi	Assignments required anchoring analysis in organizational contexts.	Embedding equity stance in organizational problem-solving
Observations	Faculty urged candidates to "take it home" and apply leadership stance in districts/agencies.	Extending equity commitments to systemic practice

Brooke described how she adapted the PAR cycle in her district office: “We didn’t just study the data for class. I took it back to my district team. We identified gaps in advanced placement enrollment and then used the cycle to test small changes. It became a way of working, not just an assignment” (Interview). Felix shared a similar application: “The equity audit I started for the program turned into a district-wide review. People realized it wasn’t just a school issue—it was systemic. The program gave me a method to push for change” (Memo).

Digital stories further illustrate the impact of inquiry-in-action. Nolan reflected, “At first, I thought research was about writing papers. But when we used PAR with our community, I saw how inquiry could actually shift policy. We presented our findings to the school board, and they changed the discipline code” (Digital story). Imani added, “For me, inquiry became activism. We weren’t just asking questions, we were demanding answers and bringing people into the process who were usually left out” (Digital story).

The program’s design deliberately blurred the distinction between coursework and organizational application. Collapsed syllabi required candidates to embed inquiry within their leadership contexts, and faculty emphasized that “data must travel” from analysis to action. Observations of cohort presentations revealed candidates testing their findings with peers and applying those insights to their professional settings. This recursive process—study, apply, revise, enact—made inquiry not merely a skill but a sustained praxis of leadership.

As summarized in Table 24, participants used inquiry tools as levers for systemic change. Across these accounts, they described employing inquiry as leadership work—gathering evidence, amplifying marginalized voices, and mobilizing collective action to disrupt inequities. These experiences demonstrate how inquiry evolved from an academic exercise to an instrument of organizational transformation. The following subsection, *Redefining Leadership Norms,* examines how this outward enactment also prompted participants to challenge and reshape prevailing expectations of leadership within their institutions.

Redefining Leadership Norms

As candidates carried their equity commitments and inquiry tools into their organizations, they began to challenge long-standing assumptions about what leadership should look like. Participants described learning to see equity as integral to effective leadership—less as an abstract concept and more as a daily practice of fairness, inclusion, and accountability. Many rejected traditional notions of positional authority and value-neutral leadership, instead defining leadership as relational, equity-oriented, and collective. This redefinition was often uncomfortable in settings where hierarchical, compliance-driven leadership was the norm, yet participants viewed it as essential for driving systemic change.

Felix recalled the tension of this shift: “My district expects principals to keep the peace, not stir things up. But I realized equity work is disruptive by nature. Leadership isn’t about keeping everyone comfortable—it’s about naming what others avoid and staying in the discomfort,” (Memo). Brooke expressed a similar reorientation: “Before, I thought leading meant setting direction and keeping control. Now, I see it as creating conditions where others can lead, especially voices that have been silenced” (Interview).

Table 24

Inquiry as a Lever for Systemic Change

Data source	Illustrative evidence	Observed leadership practice
Brooke (interview)	"We didn't just study the data for class. I took it back to my district team… It became a way of working, not just an assignment."	Embedding PAR cycles into district processes
Felix (memo)	"The equity audit I started for the program turned into a district-wide review… The program gave me a method to push for change."	Scaling inquiry from school-level to systemic review
Nolan (digital story)	"We used PAR with our community… presented findings to the school board, and they changed the discipline code."	Using inquiry to influence policy decisions
Imani (digital story)	"For me, inquiry became activism… bringing people into the process who were usually left out."	Mobilizing inquiry as participatory activism
Program syllabi	Collapsed syllabi required candidates to embed inquiry in their leadership contexts.	Structuring inquiry as part of leadership practice
Observations	Faculty emphasized that "data must travel" from analysis to action.	Expecting inquiry to move from coursework to systems

Digital stories captured how this reframing became part of candidates' professional identity. Nolan reflected, "I used to think leaders were the ones with answers. Now I know leadership is asking better questions and letting others shape the solutions. That's a big change from how I was trained" (Digital story). Imani added, "I stopped trying to be the fixer. Instead, I started facilitating space for my staff and community to lead together. That's what equity leadership looks like" (Digital story).

Program documents reinforced this evolving understanding of leadership. The Community Learning Exchange (CLE) axioms, referenced throughout syllabi and WebExchanges, emphasized that "learning and leadership are a collective process" (Guajardo et al., 2016). Observations of cohort discussions revealed that faculty modeled vulnerability—sharing uncertainties to demonstrate that leadership rests on openness rather than control. Through these structures, participants learned to view leadership as a shared practice that distributes influence and responsibility across the community. As summarized in Table 25, participants redefined leadership norms by implementing equity-oriented practices that challenged traditional hierarchies. They did not simply apply equity tools within existing frameworks; they reimagined those frameworks altogether. By shifting from positional authority to distributed leadership and from neutrality to justice-oriented action, candidates redefined what it meant to lead change in complex educational systems. The following subsection, Carrying Equity Praxis Beyond the Program, examines how participants extended these commitments beyond the university context, sustaining equity praxis in their professional and community settings.

Table 25

Redefining Leadership Norms

Data source	Illustrative evidence	Observed leadership practice
Felix (memo)	"My district expects principals to keep the peace… equity work is disruptive by nature."	Naming inequities despite resistance
Brooke (interview)	"Before, I thought leading meant setting direction and keeping control… Now, I see it as creating conditions where others can lead."	Redistributing leadership to include marginalized voices
Nolan (digital story)	"I used to think leaders were the ones with answers… Now I know leadership is asking better questions and letting others shape the solutions."	Leading through inquiry rather than control
Imani (digital story)	"I stopped trying to be the fixer… I started facilitating space for my staff and community to lead together."	Facilitating collective leadership
Program syllabi (CLE axioms) Observations	"Learning and leadership are a collective process." Faculty modeled vulnerability, sharing uncertainties.	Framing leadership as a collective practice Modeling leadership without relying on certainty

Carrying Equity Praxis Beyond the Program

For many candidates, the most visible evidence of transformation was how they approached equity praxis beyond the formal boundaries of coursework and the program. Participants reported that equity had become an integral part of how they think and lead, no longer confined to academic reflection, but embedded in their ongoing professional decision-making and sense of purpose. Brooke described how this stance continued to guide her in new roles: “Even when I changed schools, I carried the lens with me. Equity wasn’t something I left behind in the program. It became the way I lead, no matter the context” (Memo). Maya (C5) echoed this ongoing commitment: “The program ended, but the questions it raised didn’t. I keep asking myself—who is being left out? What structures are we upholding? That’s now part of how I make every decision” (Memo).

Digital stories highlighted ripple effects that extended beyond individual leadership. Nolan explained, “I’ve started mentoring younger leaders, showing them that equity isn’t a trend but a responsibility. If the program taught me anything, it’s that the work doesn’t stop with me—it multiplies” (Digital story). Imani affirmed this systemic perspective: “I can’t imagine leadership without equity anymore. It’s not about a course or a cohort. It’s about the future we’re building in our schools and communities” (Digital story).

The program was intentionally designed to anticipate this continuation. Capstone assignments required candidates to connect dissertation findings to their ongoing leadership practice, and observations from the final WebExchange showed faculty encouraging students to "take the work with you." By the program's conclusion, participants were not only enacting equity within their organizations but also articulating it as a lifelong professional and moral responsibility. As summarized in Table 26, evidence from student memos, digital stories, program documents, and observations illustrates how participants carried equity praxis beyond the program into their professional and community contexts. In doing so, participants' learning experiences positioned equity not as a temporary skill but as a sustained orientation to leadership, informing how they enacted their roles beyond the program. Candidates described a continuing sense of accountability to their communities and to advancing equity within their systems, illustrating how the program experience contributed to leaders who viewed equity as a sustained professional and ethical commitment. Viewed together, the subcategories of this finding show how candidates enacted equity across multiple levels of practice. Participants translated equity commitments into decision-making and supervision, used inquiry tools as levers for organizational change, redefined leadership norms away from control and neutrality, and sustained equity praxis as a lifelong responsibility. Through participants' actions and reflections as a systemic concern—one that shaped policies, structures, and professional identities within their own spheres of influence.

Table 26

Carrying Equity Praxis Beyond the Program

Data source	Illustrative evidence	Observed leadership practice
Brooke (memo)	"Even when I changed schools, I carried the lens with me… It became the way I lead."	Sustaining equity stance across roles and contexts
Maya (memo)	"The program ended, but the questions it raised didn't… That's now part of every decision."	Embedding equity inquiry into ongoing decision-making
Nolan (digital story)	"I've started mentoring younger leaders… the work doesn't stop with me—it multiplies."	Mentoring and multiplying equity practice in others
Imani (digital story)	"I can't imagine leadership without equity anymore… It's about the future we're building."	Framing equity as a lifelong responsibility
Program syllabi Observations	Capstone assignments required connecting dissertation findings to ongoing practice. Faculty at final WebExchange urged students to "take the work with you."	Linking scholarship to continued leadership practice Institutionalizing equity as a post-program expectation

Finding 2: Design Activators—Praxis for Organizational and Systemic Improvement reflect the program's fullest expression of transformational design as experienced by participants**.** After embracing equity leadership (Category 1) and enacting it within dynamic, evolving contexts (Category 2), candidates carried these commitments into systemic arenas, reframing leadership as equity-driven action. Through this progression, they mobilized inquiry as praxis, redefined leadership norms, and sustained equity as a continuing professional and moral responsibility that extended beyond the program itself.

Advancing systemic change thus marked more than the completion of doctoral coursework; it represented participants' capacity to apply what they learned in an authentic professional context. The International EdD functioned as a developmental environment where inquiry, reflection, and collaboration supported leaders in extending their commitments to fairness, access, and community accountability across systems. The following synthesis draws these subcategories together to summarize *Finding 2* and situates it within the study's broader developmental arc.

Summary of Finding 2

Finding 2: Design Activators—Praxis for Organizational and Systemic Improvement, illustrates how participants interpreted and enacted the program's emphasis on inquiry and ethical responsibility, aligning most directly with Research Question 3. Building on Finding 1, Design Anchors: Belonging, Trust, and Adult Development, which cultivated belonging and developmental growth, participants moved from embracing equity as a personal stance (Category 1: Embracing Equity Leadership) to practicing it in dynamic, evolving contexts (Category 2: Leading in the In-Between) and finally to enacting it as systemic leadership (Category 3: Advancing Systemic Change). This developmental arc suggests that equity functioned not as a

discrete topic but as a foundation of professional legitimacy. By translating stance into systemic action, mobilizing inquiry as praxis, redefining leadership norms, and sustaining equity commitments beyond program boundaries, participants positioned themselves as leaders accountable for identifying and addressing inequities within their respective contexts —schools, districts, and communities.

Together, the two overarching findings address the study's three research questions by demonstrating how program design fostered a sense of belonging and developmental growth (RQ1 and RQ2), while cultivating leaders who viewed equity as an ongoing professional responsibility and a catalyst for organizational learning. (RQ3). These patterns reveal how the program balanced anchoring forces—belonging, trust, and developmental supports that stabilized persistence—with activating forces—equity praxis and systemic leadership that propelled participants toward change. In this interplay between stability and movement, the International EdD operated as both a holding environment for adult development and a catalyst for reflective, equity-oriented transformation within professional and community contexts.

Summary of the Chapter

Finding 2: Design Activators—Praxis for Organizational and Systemic Improvement, demonstrates how participants interpreted and enacted equity as a developmental and professional throughline, aligning most directly with Research Question 3. Building on Finding 1, Design Anchors: Belonging, Trust, and Adult Development, which emphasized belonging, trust, and developmental growth, participants moved from embracing equity as a personal stance (Category 1: Embracing Equity Leadership), to practicing it in dynamic, evolving contexts (Category 2: Leading in the In-Between), and ultimately to enacting it as systemic leadership (Category 3: Advancing Systemic Change). This developmental arc demonstrates that equity

served as a unifying principle, guiding participants' sensemaking and professional actions. By translating stance into systemic practice, mobilizing inquiry as praxis, and sustaining equity commitments beyond program boundaries, participants demonstrated how reflective, inquiry-driven leadership can serve as a mechanism for systemic improvement.

Together, the two findings address the study's three research questions by demonstrating how program design fosters a sense of belonging and promotes developmental growth (RQ1 and RQ2), while enabling graduates to apply inquiry and reflection to achieve equitable improvement in their professional contexts (RQ3). These patterns reveal that when learning environments balance anchoring forces—such as belonging, trust, and adult development—with activating forces—such as systemic leadership and ethical responsiveness—they create conditions for transformation. In this interplay between stability and movement, the International EdD functioned as both a holding environment for adult development and a catalyst for sustained, reflective leadership within complex systems.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

At the close of this study, one image encapsulates the essence of what unfolded: the dynamic interplay between anchoring and activating forces. On one hand, the program's environment and opportunities functioned as anchoring forces—a centripetal pull drawing candidates into community, grounding them through belonging and trust, and sustaining their persistence. the program's emphasis on equity-oriented inquiry and reflective leadership operated as an activating force—a centrifugal push propelling leaders beyond the program to enact systemic change in their professional contexts. This dual motion reveals that the International EdD was designed not simply for doctoral completion but to launch leaders on a trajectory of equity-focused transformation. Within this balance of being held and being propelled, the findings of this study gain their most profound meaning.

This dissertation examined how the International Doctor of Education (EdD) in Educational Leadership at East Carolina University, an Off-Model program, designed coursework and experiences that moved learning from transactional routines to transformational outcomes. Through intentional course design, which encompasses contextualized assignments, collaborative inquiry, iterative reflection, and equity as a form of rigor, the program positions the course structure as a lever for adult development and leadership practice. This chapter returns to the central question: Can online professional doctorates be designed to ensure persistence and timely completion while transforming leaders' ways of knowing, being, and acting in equity-focused practice?

The preceding chapters laid the groundwork for this inquiry. Chapter 1 introduced the focus of practice, situating it within the tension between transactional and transformational program design. Chapter 2 reviewed the literature on online doctoral education, adult learning,

and equity praxis, foregrounding the theoretical anchors of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997), adult development (Kegan, 1994; Drago-Severson, 2009), and online learning frameworks such as the Community of Inquiry (Garrison et al., 2000) and transactional distance theory (Moore, 1993). Chapter 3 described the International EdD as the bounded case, highlighting its Off-Model funding structure, curricular design, and global learning exchanges. Chapter 4 outlined the study's qualitative design, data sources, and analytic approach.

Chapter 5 presented two overarching findings. Finding 1, Design Anchors: Belonging, Trust, and Adult Development, demonstrated how identity artifacts, peer collaboration, and program scaffolds cultivated persistence and leadership growth. Finding 2: Design Activators—Praxis for Organizational and Systemic Improvement, showed how equity was deliberately designed, embraced as leadership (Embracing Equity Leadership), practiced in dynamic, evolving contexts (Leading in the In-Between), and advanced into systemic action (Advancing Systemic Change). Together, these findings respond to the study's three research questions: if higher education is serious about belonging and development, it must design environments and opportunities that hold learners in community and scaffold their growth (RQ1, RQ2); Likewise, when programs integrate equity as a core element of design, coursework and inquiry can propel leaders beyond persistence toward organizational and systemic improvement (RQ3).

Before turning to interpretation, Table 27 provides a concise summary of the two findings and representative forms of supporting evidence. This synthesis provides a concise reference point for the reader, bridging the transition from findings to discussion.

Table 27

Findings, Core Claims, and Key Evidence

Finding	Core claim	Key evidence highlights
Finding 1: Design Anchors—Belonging, Trust, and Adult Development	Identity-based assignments, autobiographies, digital stories, collaborative dialogue, faculty presence, and cohort routines cultivated belonging and trust, creating conditions for persistence and transformational growth.	Autobiographies, digital stories, identity-based assignments, peer collaboration, faculty presence across modalities, and cohort routines that reinforced belonging and trust.
Finding 2: Design Activators—Praxis for Organizational and Systemic Improvement	Equity functioned as a central dimension of leadership learning—examined, practiced, and applied within evolving professional contexts. Coursework engaged candidates in examining assumptions, testing leadership practices, and applying equity frameworks within organizational contexts.	Equity stance reflections, peer facilitation assignments, collaborative inquiry cycles, feedback loops, equity audits, policy analyses, and participatory action research (PAR) projects.

This chapter proceeds in four parts. First, the findings are revisited through the lenses of transformative learning, adult development, and equity praxis, linking them to the broader literature. Second, a new conceptual framework is introduced to synthesize how environment, opportunity, and equity praxis interact in program design. Third, the research questions are explicitly addressed, demonstrating how each was answered through the study's two findings. Finally, the chapter concludes with implications for practice, policy, and future research, followed by reflections on the study's overall contributions and limitations.

Discussion of the Findings

This chapter builds upon the study's two findings by interpreting their significance, situating them within the broader literature, and drawing conceptual and practical implications. Specifically, it revisits the research questions that guided the inquiry:

1. How does the program's learning environment, characterized by its focus on local context, collaborative decision-making, and reflective practice, shape the transformational development of educational leaders?

2. In what ways do the opportunities provided by the program (such as iterative reflective exercises and data-driven decision making) contribute to adult development and transformative leadership practices among participants?

3. How do participants interpret the program's emphasis on equity, inclusive practices, and critical engagement with institutional norms as influencing their approaches to leadership and organizational improvement?

Methodologically, the study drew on a diverse data set that included group and individual interviews with students, program syllabi and artifacts, and observations of both online WebExchanges and in-person Summer Learning Exchanges. These sources provided a layered

perspective on how course design functioned in practice. Coding and analysis were guided by the theoretical frames outlined in Chapter 2, ensuring that interpretation remained anchored in adult learning and equity-focused theory.

This chapter is organized into four sections. First, the findings are revisited through the lenses of transformative learning, adult development, and equity praxis, with explicit responses to each research question. Second, a new conceptual framework is introduced to synthesize the study's contributions and illustrate how environment, opportunity, and equity praxis interact in transformational course design. Third, the implications for practice, policy, and research are considered, with attention to both the local context of International EdD and the broader field of professional doctoral education. Finally, the chapter concludes with a reflection on the study's contributions and limitations, underscoring its significance for advancing equity-driven, adult-focused, and transformational approaches to online doctoral education.

In summary, this chapter is not a restatement of results but an interpretation of their meaning. It considers how the International EdD program enacted its dual promise of completion and transformation, and what that enactment reveals for the design of future programs. By revisiting the findings through theory and literature, presenting a new conceptual framework, and drawing implications for multiple audiences, the chapter offers a closing synthesis of what has been learned and why it matters.

With this framing in place, the discussion begins by examining how the International EdD program was designed for belonging, trust, and adult development.

Discussion of Finding 1: Design Anchors

The International EdD program did more than assemble a sequence of online courses. It intentionally created a learning environment where belonging and trust were not incidental

byproducts but essential conditions for growth. Candidates described feeling recognized as whole people, both in who they were and in who they were becoming as leaders. That recognition emerged through identity-based assignments, collaborative dialogue, and reflective routines that provided space for personal and professional development. Faculty presence and consistent cohort structures reinforced this environment, creating the psychological safety needed for students to take risks, reveal vulnerabilities, and persist through the demands of doctoral study.

The emphasis on psychological safety aligns with Mezirow's (1997) assertion that transformative learning requires contexts in which assumptions can be questioned without fear of dismissal. Activities such as autobiographies, "I Am From" emulation poems, and digital stories may appear modest, yet they invited candidates to share personal narratives in collective settings. As one participant observed, reading her cohort's digital stories felt like "being handed the keys to someone's heart"—a moment that deepened her willingness to reexamine her own assumptions.

Knowles's (2015) principles of andragogy help explain why these design choices were effective. Adults bring prior experience, expect relevance, and value autonomy. The International EdD honored those needs by grounding assignments in candidates' professional contexts. Rather than analyzing generic case studies, students examined their own schools and districts, making the work authentic and consequential. This respect for prior experience, interests, and knowledge built trust, as participants were treated not as novices but as colleagues with valuable insight. From a developmental perspective, Kegan (1994) and Drago-Severson (2009) emphasize that growth occurs when learners are simultaneously supported and challenged. The program provided this dual dynamic. Faculty presence and cohort routines offered stability, while

collaborative decision-making and inquiry cycles challenged participants to consider multiple perspectives and adopt new ways of thinking.

The Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison et al., 2000) also sheds light on these dynamics. The program strengthened social presence (through belonging and rituals of trust), teaching presence (through consistent scaffolding), and cognitive presence (through inquiry tasks tied to professional practice). Together, these elements reduced what Moore (1993) described as transactional distance. Remarkably, even though candidates were scattered across countries and time zones, many described feeling more connected in this program than in prior face-to-face experiences.

This finding reinforces Archibald, Coggins, and Ritchie's (2019) conclusion that online doctoral students thrive when program design emphasizes relational connectedness. It also resonates with Felten and Lambert's (2020) argument that relationship-rich education drives graduate student success. However, the International EdD extends this literature by demonstrating that belonging and trust were not peripheral supports but were deliberately embedded into the coursework from the first summer. In contrast to transactional models critiqued by Bawa (2016), which can lead to students experiencing isolation despite participating in activities, the International EdD weaved belonging into its very design and sustained it across semesters. Table 28 synthesizes how specific course design features fostered a sense of belonging and trust while supporting adult development.

Table 28

Belonging and Trust as Foundations for Adult Development

Design feature	Experience of belonging and trust	Developmental contribution
Autobiographies and "I Am From" poems Mandalas and digital stories	Helped students feel seen as whole persons Invited vulnerability and deepened cohort recognition	Established early cohort trust and safety Encouraged perspective-taking and identity exploration
Faculty presence and routines Collaborative inquiry cycles	Provided stability and consistent guidance Required dialogue and risk-taking	Balanced support and challenge for adult growth Strengthened cognitive presence and leadership practice

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Overall, the evidence indicates that the International EdD fostered growth by establishing belonging and trust as essential conditions for learning. Contextualized tasks, collaborative routines, and reflective practices created an environment where adult learners could move beyond compliance, test new ideas, and develop more complex ways of making meaning. By meeting the core needs of adult learners (Knowles, 2015) while prompting perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1997) and developmental complexity (Kegan, 1994), the program demonstrated that intentional course design can create the psychological safety and relational grounding necessary for transformational learning, even in an online, globally dispersed doctoral program.

Discussion of Finding 2: Design Activators

This section revisits Finding 2, which unfolded across three categories: (a) embracing equity leadership, (b) leading in the in-between, and (c) advancing systemic change. Together, these categories demonstrate how participants engaged with uncertainty as a developmental space and ultimately extended equity praxis outward as they reconsidered their leadership identity, practice, and organizational processes.

Assignments such as equity inventories, policy analyses, and Participatory Action Research (PAR) projects engaged candidates in examining institutional contexts using equity frameworks described in the literature (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 2006). These tasks were not abstract; they demanded data collection, collaborative interpretation, and concrete recommendations. One candidate reflected that “once you have measured inequity in your own system, you cannot unsee it,” an insight that illustrates how inquiry tasks became catalysts for sustained changes one participant explained in a digital story, ‘I am in a place where I can no

longer stay silent in the face of injustice,' illustrating how the experience prompted personal reflection on leadership and responsibility.

The program's design resonates with frameworks that conceptualize equity as both an analytical stance and a professional practice. hooks (1994) described education as the practice of freedom, requiring leaders to disrupt entrenched norms, while Ladson-Billings (2006) reframed the "achievement gap" as an education debt rooted in systemic inequities. These perspectives were reflected in candidates' growing recognition that equity work was not supplemental but foundational to leadership. Consistent with the Community Learning Exchange (CLE) axioms, participants described equity as relational, dialogic, and grounded in the wisdom of those closest to the issues.

The developmental challenge of equity praxis aligns with Kegan's (1994) claim that leaders must evolve toward more complex meaning-making systems, particularly when navigating conflicting organizational values. Drago-Severson (2009) similarly emphasized that adult growth requires both support and challenge, a dynamic that is evident as participants encounter institutional resistance while finding affirmation within their cohort.

The International EdD also embodied principles of participatory action research (Guajardo et al., 2016; Ryan & Watson, 2021). By positioning candidates as co-practitioner researchers, the program engaged them in inquiries that were academically rigorous and community-responsive in nature. Many described these projects as transformational because they blurred the boundaries between scholarship and practice, allowing leaders to apply their learning collaboratively within their professional and local contexts. This finding complements prior research demonstrating that online doctoral programs can advance equity when designed with intentionality. Archibald, Coggins, and Ritchie (2019) highlighted the importance of relational

connectedness, and McClure and Spanierman (2020) found that faculty modeling of equity practices shaped student outcomes. The International EdD extends this scholarship by showing that equity praxis functioned as a central design principle rather than a peripheral theme. Graduates described leaving the program with the dispositions and tools to identify and address structural challenges within their schools, districts, and ministries of education.

As summarized in Table 29, equity was enacted through multiple, reinforcing structures, including signature assignments, participatory research, reflective writing, and faculty modeling. These practices ensured that equity functioned not merely as a conceptual theme but as an applied element of the curriculum, preparing candidates to engage thoughtfully with uncertainty and to apply their learning to leadership practice within complex educational systems. The evidence suggests that the International EdD's emphasis on equity encouraged participants to apply equity-focused frameworks within their professional contexts. Through inquiry-driven assignments, critical reflection, and collaborative decision-making, participants described learning to view equity as a dimension of rigor and to consider fairness and inclusion as integral to effective leadership. By embedding these themes throughout the coursework, the program demonstrated how a professional doctorate can support graduates in applying their learning to improvement and innovation within their educational institutions.

Overall, Finding 2 illustrates how equity evolved from a threshold perspective to an active practice and, ultimately, to systemic implementation. With both findings now established and interpreted, the discussion turns to the study's guiding research questions, clarifying how the evidence aligns with the analytic frame and demonstrates the coherence of Findings 1 and 2 in addressing RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3.

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Table 29

Equity Praxis Embedded in Program Design

Design feature	Equity focus	Participant-reported effects
Equity audits & policy analyses	Made inequities visible in institutional data	Participants identified strategies for organizational improvement
Participatory action research (PAR)	Positioned students as co-practitioner researchers	Blurred boundaries between scholarship and practice; Linked inquiry to fairness and inclusion within professional contexts
Faculty modeling of equity praxis	Equity is discussed as integral to academic rigor, not optional	Reinforced the expectation that leadership study integrates fairness and inclusivity
Reflective assignments & collaborative dialogue	Required critical engagement with norms	Supported leaders in integrating fairness and inclusiveness into their professional identity

Research Questions and Responses

Having interpreted the findings in relation to theory and prior scholarship, this section revisits the study's three guiding research questions. Its purpose is to clarify how the findings connect to the analytic framework and to demonstrate the coherence of the evidence in answering each question. Together, these responses highlight how the International EdD's intentional design advanced both developmental and systemic dimensions of transformation.

The discussion now shifts from interpretation to synthesis, linking the empirical findings to the study's conceptual anchor, transformative learning, adult development, and equity as rigor and praxis. In doing so, it re-examines how the program's design features, observed practices, and participant experiences collectively respond to the study's central problem of practice: how online professional doctorates can move beyond transactional structures to foster transformational learning and equity-driven leadership.

Table 30 provides an overview of the alignment among research questions, findings, and representative evidence, followed by narrative responses to each question. The table demonstrates that both findings intersect with all three research questions, showing a consistent developmental arc from learning environment to opportunity to systemic impact. Each research question is then revisited in narrative form, illustrating how the findings collectively address the study's analytic framework.

Table 30

Research Question–Finding Crosswalk

Research question	Aligned finding(s)	Key evidence highlights
RQ1. How does the program's learning environment—characterized by its focus on local context, collaborative decision-making, and reflective practice—shape the transformational development of educational leaders?	Finding 1: Design Anchors—Belonging, Trust, and Adult Development	Identity-based assignments, autobiographies, digital stories, faculty presence, and cohort structures cultivated belonging, trust, and developmental growth.
RQ2. In what ways do the opportunities provided by the program (such as iterative reflective exercises and data-driven decision making) contribute to adult development and transformative leadership practices among participants?	Finding 1 and Finding 2: Design Anchors and Design Activators—Reflection and inquiry as developmental and equity practices	Iterative reflection, inquiry cycles, and contextualized tasks embedded in coursework promoted adult development and equity-driven leadership practice.
RQ3. How do participants interpret and describe the program's attention to equity, inclusive practices, and critical engagement with institutional norms as influencing their leadership and organizational improvement approaches?	Finding 2: Design Activators—Praxis for Organizational and Systemic Improvement	Equity inventories, PAR projects, policy analyses, and reflective assignments equipped leaders to confront inequities and enact systemic change.

RQ1. Learning Environment and Transformational Development

The first research question was primarily addressed through *Finding 1, Design Anchors—Belonging, Trust, and Adult Development*, which demonstrated that the International EdD's learning environment cultivated belonging and trust as essential conditions for growth rather than incidental outcomes. Instead of treating relational connection as an optional support, the program wove identity-based assignments, reflective storytelling, and faculty presence directly into coursework. These design choices created psychological safety that encouraged vulnerability and persistence, allowing candidates to take intellectual risks while managing the demands of doctoral study.

The emphasis on belonging and trust resonates with Mezirow's (1997) claim that perspective transformation requires contexts in which assumptions can be surfaced without fear of dismissal. Kegan's (1994) constructive-developmental theory and Drago-Severson's (2009) model of adult growth help explain why this design was effective: participants were simultaneously supported through consistent faculty presence and cohort routines while being challenged through collaborative inquiry tasks and reflective practice. The Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000) also illuminates these dynamics, as the program strengthened social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence. Together, these features reduced transactional distance (Moore, 1993), enabling globally dispersed candidates to feel more connected than in many face-to-face settings.

The significance of these findings lies in showing that belonging and trust were not accidental benefits but deliberately embedded into the program's design from the first semester onward. This intentionality extends prior research highlighting the importance of relational connectedness for online doctoral students (Archibald, Coggins, & Ritchie, 2019; Felten &

Lambert, 2020) by demonstrating how course-embedded practices can institutionalize belonging as rigor rather than as an add-on. In this way, the International EdD demonstrates that a professional doctorate can cultivate persistence and transformational growth by designing learning environments that recognize adult learners as whole persons and position them to develop more complex ways of knowing and leading.

RQ2. Opportunities and Adult Development.

The second research question was addressed across both findings, demonstrating how the International EdD embedded opportunities for developmental growth into coursework. In *Finding 1*, candidates engaged in iterative reflection and collaborative inquiry that allowed them to test, revise, and refine their leadership practices. Assignments were not abstract simulations but grounded in their own professional contexts, which increased both authenticity and relevance. In Design Activators: Praxis for Organizational and Systemic Improvement, opportunities expanded to include equity praxis, policy analyses, equity inventories, and PAR projects, engaging candidates in applying equity frameworks within their institutional context. Across both findings, developmental opportunities were not supplemental activities but the core engine of the program's design.

Adult development theory helps explain why these opportunities were so powerful. Kegan (1994) argued that growth occurs when learners encounter experiences that disrupt their prior meaning-making structures, provided they receive adequate support to integrate new perspectives. Drago-Severson (2009) similarly emphasized that adults grow when both challenge and support are present. The International EdD operationalized these principles by striking a balance between stability (through faculty presence and cohort routines) and ongoing cycles of reflection, data analysis, and collaborative problem-solving. This alignment ensured that

assignments were developmental rather than transactional, moving beyond knowledge acquisition toward shifts in identity and practice.

The significance of this finding lies in showing how developmental opportunities embedded in coursework can cultivate leadership habits rather than isolated skills. While prior studies have noted the importance of applied projects for adult learners, this program demonstrates that equity-oriented inquiry embedded across semesters can accelerate developmental growth and leadership transformation. In this way, the International EdD contributes to the literature on practice-based doctoral education by demonstrating that opportunities for reflection and inquiry, when sustained and equity-focused, prepare leaders for systemic—not merely individual —change.

RQ3. Equity Praxis and Systemic Change

The third research question was addressed through *Finding 2: Design Activators—Praxis for Organizational and Systemic Improvement*, which demonstrated how the International EdD positioned equity as an element of rigor and a defining feature of doctoral-level leadership learning. Coursework engaged candidates in examining assumptions, identifying inequities, and developing context-responsive approaches. These experiences transformed equity from a theoretical construct to an applied professional practice, prompting participants to reflect on and adapt their leadership approaches. Theoretical anchors illuminate the depth of this shift. hooks (1994) described education as a practice of freedom that invites learners to question entrenched inequities, while Ladson-Billings (2006) reframed the achievement gap as an education debt rooted in systemic injustice. Kegan's (1994) constructive-developmental theory underscores that equity praxis requires increasingly complex ways of making meaning, particularly when navigating resistance or institutional pushback. Drago-Severson's (2009) model also highlights

the necessity of balancing challenge and support, a dynamic that is evident as candidates grapple with organizational constraints while drawing affirmation from peers and faculty. Together, these frameworks reveal how the program helped participants internalize equity as both a stance and a practice.

The significance of these findings lies in the program's contribution to leadership preparation. While prior studies have documented the importance of relational connectedness (Archibald, Coggins, & Ritchie, 2019) and faculty modeling of equity (McClure & Spanierman, 2020), the International EdD extends this literature by demonstrating how equity was embedded as a framework for rigor across courses and assignments. The outcome was that leaders were equipped with tools and dispositions to identify and address structural challenges within their educational contexts. By demonstrating that equity praxis can be cultivated through course design, the program offers a model for how professional doctorates can prepare leaders to pursue organizational and systemic improvement, rather than isolated adjustments. Collectively, the three research questions were addressed through the program's two major findings. The evidence confirms that the International EdD created conditions for persistence while fostering transformational growth and equity-driven leadership. This analytic closure establishes the foundation for the next step: synthesizing the findings into a conceptual framework that illustrates how environment, opportunity, and equity praxis interact to shape professional doctoral design.

Summary of the Discussion

The discussion of findings and research questions confirms that the International EdD realized its dual aims of persistence and transformation. Finding 1, Design Anchors—Belonging, Trust, and Adult Development, demonstrated how belonging, trust, and adult development were intentionally cultivated through course design, while Finding 2: Design Activators—Praxis for Organizational and Systemic Improvement, revealed how equity was positioned as rigor and enacted as leadership praxis. Together, these findings addressed all three research questions, illustrating that the program created conditions in which adult learners could persist, develop, and lead toward organizational and systemic improvement.

Figure 11 synthesizes these insights, showing how the research questions align with the two findings and converge on the program's dual aims. This synthesis underscores the coherence of the study and forms a bridge from analytic interpretation to conceptual innovation.

Ultimately, the discussion illustrates how the International EdD not only sustained candidate persistence but also illuminated how transformation can be understood in professional doctoral education linking belonging, adult growth, and equity praxis within a single, cohesive design. Having established this foundation, the next section introduces a new conceptual framework that models how environment, opportunity, and equity praxis interact to create conditions for transformational learning and systemic improvement.

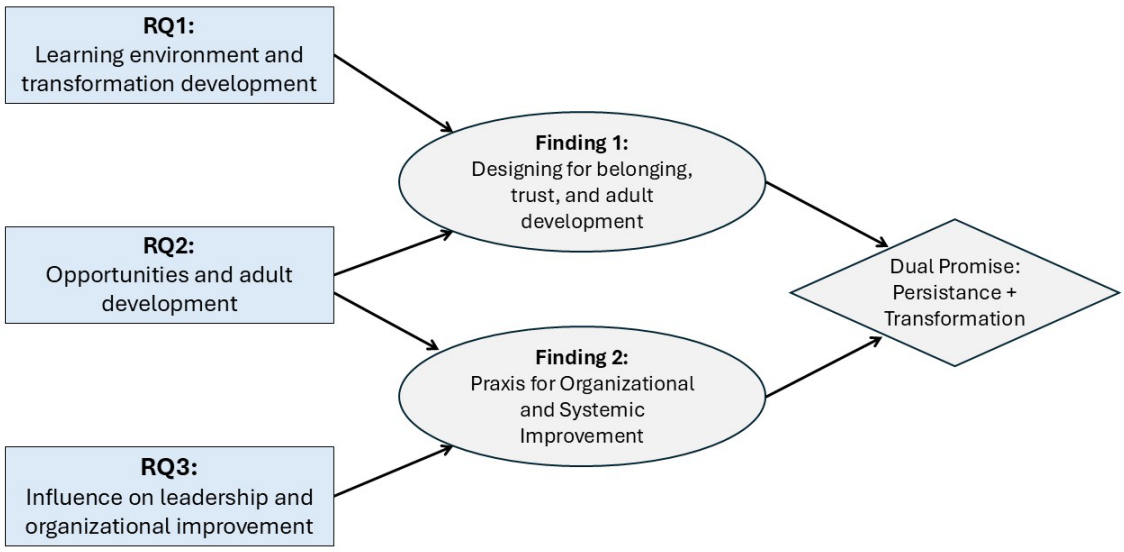


Figure 11. Research questions, findings, and dual promise.

A New Conceptual Framework

The discussion of findings and research questions provided analytical closure by showing how the International EdD fulfilled its dual promise of persistence and transformation. Building on that foundation, this section introduces a new conceptual framework that combines and expands on the study's contributions. The framework explains how intentional course design can foster belonging and trust, support adult development, and activate equity praxis as a tool for systemic change. It also demonstrates how the International EdD shows online doctoral programs can evolve from transactional design to transformational learning environments.

This conceptual framework is presented in two parts. The first introduces and depicts the Helix Model of Transformative Course Design, which illustrates how environment, opportunity, and equity praxis interweave to shape leadership development. The second outlines the model's theoretical grounding, showing how it builds upon and extends established perspectives on adult development, transformative learning, and equity praxis—positioning equity as the central driver of transformational doctoral education.

This study also reframes liminality not as a temporary threshold but as an ongoing condition of leadership development. Students who normalize liminality—learning to live in spaces of uncertainty and iteration—are better positioned to resist institutional isomorphism. Where traditional norms of schooling pull leaders toward conformity, the Helix Model demonstrates how sustained cycles of reflection, feedback, and equity-centered inquiry create a counterforce. By equipping students with both the capacity (motivation and knowledge) and the practice (structured protocols and reflection), programs can create conditions for leaders to question institutional norms rather than default to them.

This argument echoes the well-known maxim often attributed to Peter Drucker: *"Culture eats strategy for breakfast."* Even the most carefully designed reforms are vulnerable if the prevailing culture—its norms, routines, and institutional grammar (Crawford & Ostrom, 1995; Scott, 2014)—remains unexamined. The Helix Model addresses this tension by showing how equity-centered reflection and sustained liminality can interrupt default cultural patterns, illustrating how strategy can be continually recalibrated through double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Schön, 1983).

The Helix Model of Transformative Course Design

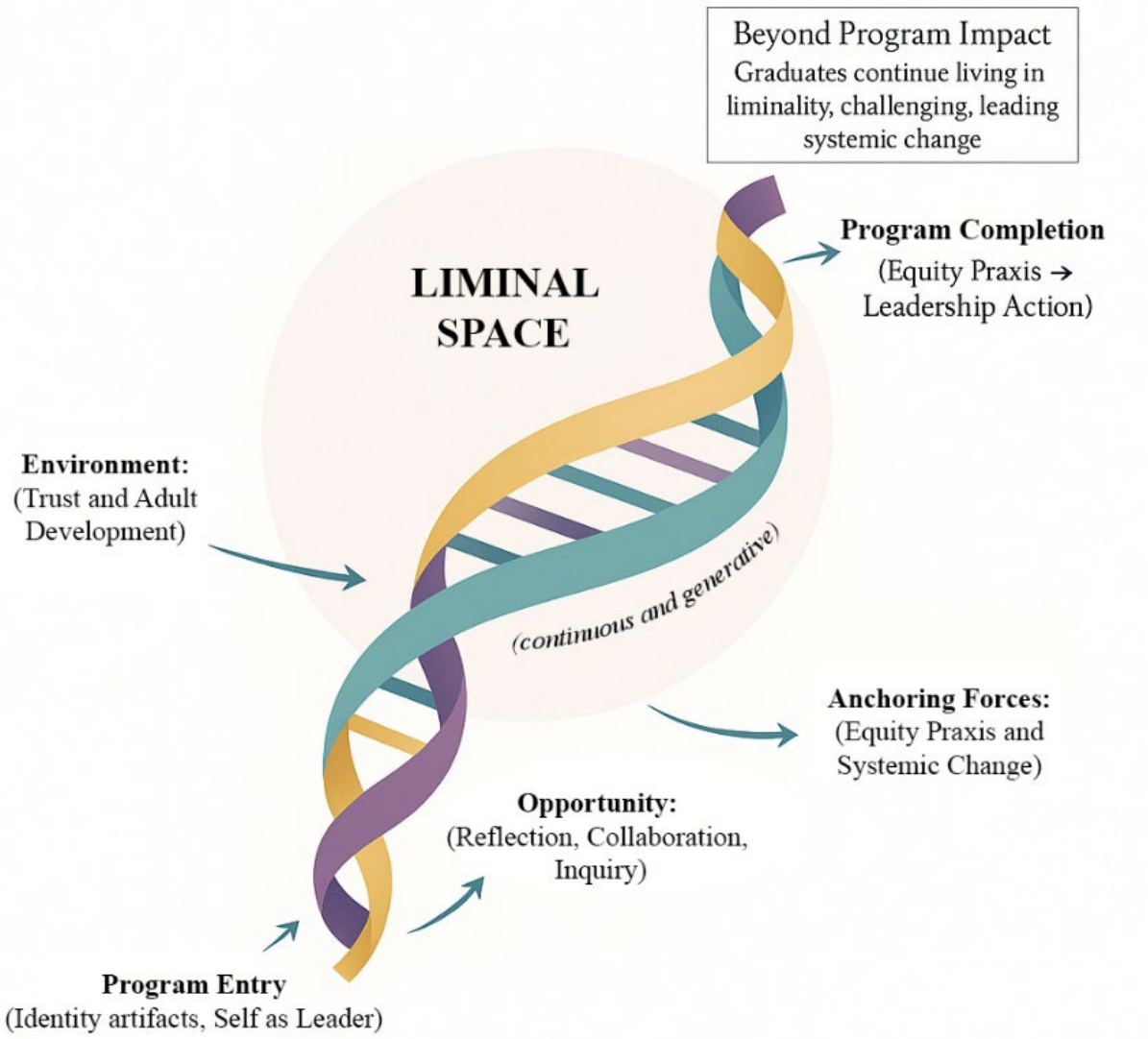
The findings from this study suggest a new way of thinking about online doctoral program design—one that moves beyond transactional delivery models. The International EdD was experienced as effective because three design strands—environment, opportunity, and equity praxis—were intentionally woven together to create conditions for persistence, transformational development, and leadership growth.

Although the Helix Model depicts three interwoven strands, the study produced two overarching findings. Finding 1, Design Anchors—Belonging, Trust, and Adult Development, encompassed the learning environment and the opportunities that cultivated belonging, trust, and adult growth. These elements anchored participants in community, provided the security to take risks, and created cycles of reflection and practice that strengthened professional identity. Finding 2: Design Activators—Praxis for Organizational and Systemic Improvement highlighted the program's emphasis on equity praxis, framing leadership as reflective and equity-informed practice oriented toward organizational and systemic improvement. The helix metaphor captures this interplay of strands and the cyclical, layered nature of participants' growth.

Figure 12 illustrates that the environment and available opportunities acted as central forces, drawing learners into the community. Meanwhile, equity praxis served as a motivating factor, pushing them outward toward advancing organizational and systemic change.

By clarifying how these three strands relate to the two findings, the model underscores that transformation in the International EdD was not a linear progression but a cyclical process. Students did not simply advance step by step toward dissertation completion; instead, they spiraled through recurring experiences of belonging, practice, and equity inquiry that deepened over time. The braiding of environment, opportunity, and equity praxis—organized here through the two overarching findings—created the conditions for transformational learning and leadership practice.

The Helix Model visually represents how transformation unfolded in the International EdD program. Each strand—environment, opportunity, and equity praxis—is distinct yet inseparable, symbolizing the interdependence of design features that supported persistence and leadership growth. The helix twists upward through liminal space, illustrating the recursive motion of reflection, feedback, and action that characterized participants' learning. As the helix ascends, the widening strands reflect increasing complexity, agency, and systemic reach. Although the model ends with program completion, the concept of liminality continues beyond the formal structure of the program. Graduates carry forward the habits of reflection, inquiry, and equity praxis that participants described as sustaining their leadership development beyond the program.



Note. The Helix Model illustrates the cyclical and generative relationship among environment (trust and adult development), opportunity (reflection, collaboration, inquiry), and equity praxis (leadership oriented toward organizational and systemic improvement). The interwoven strands illustrate how these forces operate within the liminal space of professional doctoral learning, creating persistence, transformation, and equity praxis. While the visual model concludes at program completion, the concept of liminality continues beyond the degree as graduates sustain inquiry, reflection, and equity-informed leadership in their professional contexts.

Figure 12. Helix Model of Transformative Program Design in the International EdD.

Theoretical Grounding of the Model

This braided framework builds on and extends established theories. Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theory explains how participants questioned and reconstructed assumptions through reflective practice. Kegan's (1994) constructive-developmental theory and Drago-Severson's (2009) model of adult growth clarify how support and challenge were balanced through faculty presence, cohort dialogue, and iterative inquiry. hooks (1994) positioned equity as rigor, reinforcing that justice work must serve as a central driver rather than an add-on. Building on CPED-aligned design principles (Militello et al., 2022), this study extends those foundations by framing program dynamics as the interplay between anchoring and activating forces—where environment and opportunity sustain belonging and trust, and equity praxis propels leaders toward organizational and systemic improvement.

Together, these theoretical influences demonstrate that transformational leadership preparation emerges when adult development, relational trust, and equity praxis operate as interdependent forces rather than isolated design features. This study further extends those theories by positioning liminality as an enduring stance rather than a transitional moment, showing that transformation continues as graduates engage uncertainty and reflection in their ongoing leadership practice.

Summary of the Conceptual Framework

The Helix Framework clarifies how environment, opportunity, and equity praxis interact as intertwined strands that generate both persistence and transformation. By modeling this interaction as a helix, the framework contributes to the design of professional doctoral education, demonstrating how course design itself can serve as a lever for transformational leadership preparation informed by equity principles. Rooted in both empirical evidence and theoretical

traditions, the Helix Framework presents a novel approach to understanding online doctoral design—one that prioritizes transformation over transaction. By conceptualizing liminality as an enduring condition of professional growth, the framework illustrates how transformation persists beyond program boundaries, positioning equity as rigor and countering institutional isomorphism through cycles of double-loop learning. The Helix thus bridges individual development with organizational and systemic improvement, showing that leadership transformation is not a fixed outcome but a continuing practice.

Having established this integrative model, the following section turns to the implications of this study, considering how these insights can inform program design, higher education policy, and future research.

Implications

The Helix Framework emphasizes that program design hinges on the balance of anchoring forces (centripetal, inward pull) that hold learners within a community and activating forces (centrifugal, outward push) that propel them toward organizational and systemic improvement. This dynamic has practical consequences for designing online professional doctorates. Programs that emphasize only anchoring forces may cultivate strong communities but risk insularity; those that emphasize only activating forces may propel students outward without the belonging and trust required for persistence. The International EdD demonstrated that when anchoring and activating forces are deliberately braided, programs can sustain persistence while cultivating transformational, equity-informed leadership.

These insights extend beyond a single program, offering lessons for designing online professional doctorates, offering insights into how institutions can approach equity in graduate education, and deepening research on transformational course design. Rather than treating

practice, policy, and research as separate domains, the following discussion considers them as interconnected and mutually reinforcing dimensions of professional doctoral design.

If culture, as the familiar adage suggests, "eats strategy for breakfast," then the implications of this study point toward designing programs that reshape culture itself. By normalizing liminality as an ongoing state, positioning equity as rigor, and equipping leaders with both the capacity (knowledge, motivation, skills) and the practice (protocols, reflection, feedback), the Helix Framework offers a means of addressing the institutional isomorphism that can neutralize reform. These findings suggest actionable steps for building online doctoral programs differently—preparing leaders through adult, rather than generic, development—and for advancing higher education change management that centers on belonging, growth, and inclusion.

As ECU leadership noted at the September 2025 Learner Operations Convocation, students are increasingly "shopping" for programs and asking who will make them feel cared for and at home. The findings of this study suggest that such needs are best met not through surface-level customer service but through course design that embeds a sense of belonging and promotes adult development. The International EdD illustrates how identity-honoring assignments, trust-building routines, and collaborative inquiry cycles can cultivate a sense of care within the curriculum.

These insights yield practical implications for program design, policy directions that sustain innovation, and research opportunities that extend these ideas across contexts. The following subsections elaborate on each domain, highlighting how course-embedded features can move doctoral education from transactional delivery toward transformational leadership preparation.

Practice

For practitioners and program designers, the clearest implication of this study is that course design should intentionally balance anchoring and activating forces. Anchoring forces (centripetal, inward pull)—such as belonging, trust, and adult development—create the stability and recognition that allow students to persist through the demands of doctoral study. These anchoring forces are not only cognitive but affective; they engage emotion as a form of meaning-making. Adult learners experience transformation not just through new ideas but through felt shifts in recognition, empathy, and purpose. As Dirkx (2006) reminds us, emotions are central to how adults construct meaning and move toward new perspectives. Programs that address the emotional dimensions of belonging and reflection help learners integrate their head and heart, turning abstract learning into lived transformation.

Activating forces (centrifugal, outward push)—such as equity praxis and assignments focused on fairness, inclusion, and organizational improvement—encourage leaders to apply their learning to organizational and systemic improvement. If programs emphasize anchoring only, they may foster supportive communities but risk insularity; if they emphasize activating only, they may launch students outward without the grounding needed to sustain transformation. The International EdD demonstrated that when these forces are woven through identity-honoring assignments, trust-building routines, and equity-informed inquiry, course design itself becomes a mechanism for preparing leaders for transformational leadership.

Belonging and trust, therefore, are not "extras" but emotional and developmental conditions of adult learning. Online programs should not default to transactional routines, content delivery, rigid pacing, and isolated assignments; instead, they should intentionally build structures for self-reflection, relational trust, and equity. The International EdD demonstrates

how these design choices supported persistence and cultivated enduring habits of leadership practice. Assignments such as identity artifacts (e.g., Mandalas, Norigae, and digital stories), peer feedback protocols, and leadership reflections reframed coursework as spaces of developmental practice rather than compliance. In this way, course design became a transformation lever, signaling that leadership development is inseparable from reflective and equity-informed practice**.**

A second implication is the centrality of equity as rigor. When equity is embedded into coursework through policy analyses, equity audits, or participatory action research, it communicates that leadership preparation cannot be separated from equity praxis. Faculty stance proved just as important; when instructors modeled openness, empathy, and a commitment to fairness and inclusion, students mirrored those dispositions in their own practice. Accrediting bodies and graduate schools could encourage this approach by evaluating not only technological efficiency but also relational and reflective pedagogies that treat equity as an intellectual and developmental core of doctoral preparation.

Faculty collaboration was also a powerful asset. The International EdD was innovative not only because of its curriculum, but also because the faculty worked collectively to sustain its Off-Model structure. Their engagement in improvement science cycles—refining design while adhering to core commitments created stability for students while allowing for adaptation. This type of collaboration illustrates what becomes possible when educators share commitments to adult development and equity as guiding principles. Findings suggest that institutions that recognize and reward collaborative program design may strengthen both innovation and student support, compared to models that privilege individual ownership alone. Another implication lies in how the International EdD was conceived. The program did not start with the goal of creating

another doctoral degree; it began with a root-cause analysis of persistent inequities in schools and recognized that building leadership capacity was a critical leverage point for systemic change. Program designers worked backward from that challenge to identify where an intervention could have the most significant effect on doctoral-level leadership preparation. This orientation, which begins with an analysis of equity-related challenges and works backward to program design, highlights a key lesson: meaningful innovation in higher education arises not from replicating degree structures but from pinpointing how programs can most effectively address real-world challenges in professional settings.

Looking ahead, institutions such as ECU could build on this example. Many faculty already care deeply about student success and bring disciplinary expertise. What the International EdD demonstrates is how expertise can be expanded to encompass the distinct needs of online and adult learners. Frameworks such as Quality Matters ensure that courses are navigable and accessible; the opportunity now is to extend this work into pedagogy and faculty interaction, where belonging and mattering are most directly shaped.

Much like Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which applies the architectural principle of universal design, where ramps and curb cuts initially created for accessibility ultimately benefit all users (CAST, 2018; Meyer et al., 2014), course design that integrates adult development can serve a wide range of learners, not only those in professional doctorates. Practices that reduce transactional distance, foster a sense of belonging, and emphasize the importance of mattering can strengthen recruitment, retention, and success across both undergraduate and graduate programs. The International EdD illustrates that belonging is powerful, but belonging coupled with mattering fosters deeper engagement and transformational learning.

Finally, the program offers insight into change management and organizational improvement. It was conceived through root-cause analysis, identified leadership preparation as a leverage point, and embedded cycles of reflection and revision into its design. These same principles could inform professional development for faculty and staff. If institutional learning were approached with similar intentionality, integrating belonging, equity, and adult development into professional routines and improvement cycles, professional development could become a driver of organizational improvement and adaptive learning. The design logic of the International EdD may thus be transferable beyond doctoral education to institutional learning and broader change management.

If such dispositions and practices were scaled beyond this program, findings suggest that institutions such as ECU could extend the same sense of recognition and care to all learners. Realizing this potential may depend on institutional and policy structures that protect innovation and sustain Off-Model programs as incubators for equity-informed doctoral education, embedding affect, reflection, and action as intertwined dimensions of transformative practice.

Policy

While this study centered on program design and student experience, the findings illuminate implications for how higher education conceives and supports program development. Evidence from program documents and conversations with program leaders underscored that the International EdD was built through a backward-design process, identifying a need in the world and working backward to create structures capable of addressing that need through leadership preparation. Although the study did not examine policy development directly, its findings highlight how intentional, coherent design can influence outcomes such as persistence, belonging, and transformational growth.

This study, therefore, suggests that higher education policy may benefit from reconsidering how programs are conceived, approved, and sustained. Rather than constructing degree programs course by course, a piecemeal approach that fragments coherence, policy frameworks that emphasize backward design, beginning with purpose and desired outcomes and then aligning coursework, assessment, and advising accordingly, may promote greater coherence and intentionality. Such an approach reflects the helix framework advanced in this study, in which sustainable transformation depends on balancing anchoring and activating forces across institutional levels.

At the policy level, the helix framework extends beyond program design to institutional governance. Anchoring forces (centripetal, inward pull) are supported through policies that sustain belonging, trust, and persistence, for example, flexible enrollment rules, recognition of adult learners' contexts, and structures that reduce transactional barriers. Activating forces (centrifugal, outward push) may be advanced through policies that embed equity as rigor, encourage innovation, and enable leaders to apply learning toward organizational and systemic improvement. If policy supports only anchoring, institutions may stabilize enrollment but risk insularity; if it supports only activating, institutions may encourage bold initiatives without the grounding needed for persistence. Findings from the International EdD suggest that when policies intentionally balance these anchoring and activating forces, they create the cultural and financial conditions for programs that are both sustainable and transformative. This orientation was echoed at ECU's September 2025 Learner Operations Convocation, where leaders emphasized the need to develop new revenue streams and innovative programs in response to enrollment and funding challenges. The International EdD already serves as a living example. As an Off-Model program, it generates sustainable revenue while advancing ECU's mission to be a

national model for student success. Its intentional design illustrates that modernization is not simply about adding programs or shifting delivery formats, but about embedding adult development and equity within coursework, shaping institutional culture, rather than relying solely on strategic planning.

Broader policy implications extend to how institutions define and support adult learners. Many institutional and system-level policies remain oriented towards traditional, full-time students, inadvertently disadvantaging adults who balance professional and family responsibilities. Scholarship rules, retention standards, and withdrawal timelines often assume continuous enrollment. Some of these constraints are externally mandated, while many are within the institution's control. This pattern reflects what DiMaggio and Powell (1983) described as *institutional isomorphism*, the tendency of organizations to imitate inherited structures even when they no longer fit contemporary realities. The International EdD offers a counterexample: by normalizing liminality and designing for equity as rigor, it demonstrates how programs can view deviation as recalibration rather than failure. Policies informed by this perspective could better recognize adult learners as integral participants in institutional success. Programs that design with adult learners in mind, through integrated syllabi that combine multiple courses into a coherent whole or through policies that do not penalize part-time enrollment, not only reduce transactional barriers but also increase credit-hour generation and persistence.

Off-Model programs further demonstrate how financial policy can enable innovation. Unlike state-funded programs, where tuition revenue is pooled and redistributed, receipt-supported programs allow departments to retain and reinvest tuition revenue directly. This “different color of money” creates a clearer incentive for faculty and administrators to design programs that are both financially sustainable and pedagogically bold. Because the revenue

stream is distinct, Off-Model programs are less vulnerable to being pulled back into institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983); their financial autonomy creates space for experimentation with design choices that prioritize adult development and equity. Findings from the International EdD illustrate how such structures can align financial and academic goals, supporting course design that integrates equity and adult development while sustaining institutional vitality. It is also important to acknowledge the tension higher education faces between financial sustainability and transformational purpose. Universities must generate sufficient resources to remain financially healthy, retain staff, avoid budget cuts, and sustain diverse programs. However, higher education is more than a business model; it operates as a public trust devoted to advancing knowledge and preparing future leaders. The International EdD illustrates that these imperatives need not be in conflict. By intentionally designing programs that respond to the needs of adult learners, institutions can enhance both persistence and credit-hour production. This echoes Drucker's maxim that culture eats strategy for breakfast: financial strategies alone cannot ensure vitality unless they are reinforced by a culture of equity, belonging, and adult development. Embedding these elements into program culture allows financial and developmental goals to reinforce one another rather than compete.

Accreditation agencies and state governing boards could also reinforce this orientation by evaluating not only curricular compliance but also coherence, developmental scaffolding, and equity-informed design. Rather than focusing exclusively on credit hours or delivery formats, policy evaluations that consider how program design supports belonging, persistence, and leadership development may provide a more comprehensive view of program quality**.** Similarly, higher-education innovation policies—often focused narrowly on technology or market expansion could be broadened to include pedagogical innovation that integrates adult

development and equity principles into design. Ultimately, the International EdD demonstrates that innovation in higher education is not merely a matter of delivery or format but of purpose and coherence. Policies that support programs in designing backward from transformational aims, balancing anchoring and activating forces, may influence how universities conceive, approve, and sustain professional doctorates. When financial vitality and developmental purpose are aligned, as the International EdD illustrates, policy functions not as a constraint but an enabler of institutional renewal.

Research

At the research level, the helix framework highlights opportunities to investigate how anchoring and activating forces operate across different contexts of doctoral education. Anchoring forces (centripetal, inward pull) can be studied by examining how belonging, trust, and developmental supports influence persistence in online programs (Kegan, 1994; Drago-Severson, 2009). Activating forces (centrifugal, outward push) invite research into how equity praxis, inquiry-based assignments, and leadership dispositions oriented toward fairness and inclusion shape graduates' engagement in organizational and systemic improvement (Mezirow, 1997; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2006). If scholarship examines only anchoring, it risks overemphasizing persistence without capturing transformation; if it examines only activating, it may highlight innovation but overlook the conditions needed to sustain it. Future research could therefore extend this study by testing how anchoring and activating forces, when braided, create the conditions for doctoral programs that are both rigorous and equity-informed.

Just as policy can either constrain or enable cultures of inclusion and adult development, research must also examine how these dynamics unfold across contexts. The helix framework introduced in this study positions liminality (Turner, 1969; Meyer & Land, 2005) as an ongoing

state and equity as rigor, suggesting new directions for inquiry into how leaders resist institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) and sustain developmental change over time.

These opportunities cluster around six directions for future inquiry: extending the helix across contexts, examining how liminality functions as an enduring condition, positioning equity as rigor, exploring how programs navigate institutional isomorphism, analyzing connections between doctoral education to organizational improvement, and advancing methodological approaches that capture transformational learning (Mezirow, 1997).

Extending the Helix Across Contexts

One area for future research is how course-embedded design features shape adult development (Knowles, 2015) across various programs. Many online learning studies focus on access, retention, or satisfaction, but fewer examine how belonging, trust, and equity praxis are deliberately structured into coursework. The International EdD illustrates that assignments, faculty stance, and cohort routines can function as mechanisms for developmental change. Comparative research could test whether practices such as collapsed syllabi, identity artifacts, or structured feedback protocols are effective across different institutional or disciplinary contexts.

At the same time, the helix model suggests that such design choices gain strength when viewed as interwoven strands rather than isolated interventions. Future inquiry could investigate how these practices operate not merely as course mechanics, but as components of a braided developmental framework where anchoring forces (belonging, trust, adult development) and activating forces (equity praxis, inquiry into fairness and inclusion) interact to sustain both persistence and transformation.

Future research could also investigate how the helix framework operates across various instructional modalities. This study took place within a hybrid Off-Model program that combined asynchronous coursework, synchronous WebExchanges, and an intensive international residency. These elements appeared to strengthen the helix's anchoring and activating forces, cultivating a sense of belonging and trust through embodied community while advancing equity praxis through collaborative inquiry. However, it remains unclear how the helix would operate in fully online environments without a residency component or with limited synchronous interaction. Comparative studies could investigate whether the absence of face-to-face encounters alters the relative strength of each strand—environment, opportunity, and equity praxis—or whether strong facilitation and design can replicate similar conditions of trust, presence, and developmental challenge. Such research could clarify whether the helix model represents a broadly applicable design logic for online doctoral education or one that depends on specific relational and temporal structures.

Beyond higher education, future studies may explore the applicability of the helix framework to corporate and organizational learning. Because the model integrates belonging, adult development, and equity praxis, it may hold promise for professional training, leadership development, and workplace learning ecosystems. Many organizations face the dual challenge of retaining skilled employees while cultivating adaptive and inclusive cultures. The helix's anchoring forces—belonging, trust, and developmental support—parallel organizational needs for psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) and engagement (Kegan, 1994; Drago-Severson, 2009), while its activating forces—equity, inquiry, and systemic improvement—align with innovation and organizational learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Schön, 1983). Comparative research could test whether embedding helix principles into corporate training or leadership

programs yields outcomes such as stronger organizational culture, improved employee satisfaction, and higher retention. In these settings, synchronous learning events and in-person retreats could serve as analogs to academic residencies, reinforcing the helix's dynamic balance between stability and activation.

Taken together, these lines of inquiry would test the helix model's versatility across educational and organizational systems, determining whether it functions as a generalizable framework for designing environments that foster individual growth and organizational improvement.

Sustaining Liminality as an Enduring Condition

This study reframes *liminality* not as a temporary threshold (Turner, 1969; Meyer & Land, 2005) but as a developmental stance that can be normalized and sustained. Future research might trace how doctoral programs help students engage productively with ambiguity and iteration rather than seeing these states as disruptions. Longitudinal studies could assess whether graduates who experience liminality as ongoing cycles of reflection and recalibration develop greater resilience, adaptability, and capacity for *double-loop learning* (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Schön, 1983).

Research might also examine program structures, such as residencies, inquiry projects, or collaborative assignments, that enable liminality to function as a growth process rather than a source of instability. By situating liminality within the helix, scholars can test whether continuous movement through belonging, knowledge-building, and equity praxis strengthens leadership development across diverse contexts. Here, liminality may itself be understood as the space where anchoring and activating forces converge, holding students in community while propelling them to apply learning toward organizational and systemic improvement.

Positioning Equity as Rigor in Doctoral Education

Another direction for research is how equity can serve as the intellectual and developmental core of doctoral education. Too often, equity is treated as an add-on or moral stance. This study illustrates that it can instead operate as a measure of rigor, embedded in coursework through policy analyses, equity audits, and participatory projects. Future studies could compare how different programs position equity and how this affects persistence, scholarly identity, and graduates' readiness for organizational and systemic improvement.

Theoretically, *equity as rigor* aligns with hooks' (1994) conception of education as the practice of freedom and Ladson-Billings' (2006) framing of the "education debt." Equity also intersects with liminality: working through equity often requires students to confront dissonance, re-examine assumptions, and remain engaged with uncertainty. Research might explore how the coupling of equity and liminality accelerates adult development, testing whether equity-focused coursework deepens leaders' capacity to navigate complexity and apply learning toward systemic improvement. In this framing, equity functions not only as a stance but also as an activating force that pushes leaders outward, being effective only when paired with anchoring supports that sustain persistence through challenge.

Countering Institutional Isomorphism

The study also highlights the tension between innovation and institutional pressures toward sameness—what DiMaggio and Powell (1983) describe as *institutional isomorphism*. Off-model programs offer a critical site for examining how autonomy and financial structures enable programs to make bold pedagogical choices. Future research could compare Off-Model and state-supported programs to better understand the trade-offs between flexibility, legitimacy, and sustainability.

Viewed through the lens of the helix framework, navigating isomorphism requires programs to normalize continuous experimentation. Instead of reverting to the *grammar of schooling* (Tyack & Tobin, 1994), faculty and students who are habituated to iterative cycles of reflection and redesign may sustain innovative practices over time (Bryk et al., 2015). Research could investigate whether programs that embrace liminality (Turner, 1969; Meyer & Land, 2005) as a cultural stance are better positioned to withstand institutional pressures to conform. This line of inquiry could also test whether policies and practices that emphasize anchoring forces—stability, persistence supports, and belonging (Kegan, 1994; Drago-Severson, 2009)—and activating forces—innovation and equity-informed design principles (hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2006)—create more resilient programs capable of sustaining enduring, meaningful change over time.

Linking Doctoral Education to Organizational Change

Further research could follow graduates to examine how dispositions cultivated in doctoral programs, such as equity praxis, collaborative inquiry, and double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Schön, 1983), translate into organizational learning and improvement in schools, districts, and communities. The International EdD demonstrates the potential of aligning pedagogy with program content, as students study equity while simultaneously experiencing it through coursework. Comparative studies could test whether this alignment is unique to professional fields that demand equity-oriented leadership or if it is adaptable to other contexts, such as social work, public administration, or higher education administration.

Conceptually, this research would extend the helix beyond the individual learner to the organizational level. It would test whether leaders trained to view liminality as a constant and equity as rigor can shift institutional practices away from transactional compliance toward

meaningful systemic improvement. This extension also raises the question of whether graduates act as anchoring agents in their institutions (building trust, belonging, and persistence) or as activating agents (propelling equity-focused organizational learning initiatives) or, most powerfully, as both.

Advancing Methodological Approaches that Capture Transformational Learning

Finally, this study points to the importance of methodological approaches that capture learning as designed, enacted, and experienced. This inquiry illuminated developmental processes that traditional outcome-focused studies might miss by drawing on *Community Learning Exchange* axioms (Guajardo et al., 2016), *participatory action research* cycles (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), and course-embedded artifacts. Future research could extend these approaches by utilizing collaborative inquiry (Reason & Bradbury, 2008) and artifact analysis (Miles et al., 2019) to document adult development and equity praxis in real-time.

Within the helix framework, the methodology itself can be understood as a liminal practice, being iterative, reflexive, and relational (Finlay, 2002; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Research that embraces this stance may be better equipped to reveal the layered processes through which students move from belonging to equity praxis to systemic improvement. Longitudinal studies could further show how these developmental arcs persist beyond graduation, and whether anchoring forces in program design (trust, belonging, supportive routines) combine with activating forces in equity praxis to produce sustained transformation in practice.

Collectively, these research directions invite scholars to examine how anchoring forces (centripetal, inward pull) that sustain persistence and activating forces (centrifugal, outward

push) that propel equity praxis can be studied in tandem, revealing how their braiding shapes both individual growth and collective transformation.

Summary

Together, these research directions underscore that persistence alone is not an adequate measure of online doctoral success. What matters equally is how programs are intentionally designed to cultivate belonging, trust, adult development, and equity praxis—the anchoring and activating forces at the heart of the helix framework. Future research should therefore examine how these forces interact across modalities, disciplines, and organizational contexts, testing the helix as both a design model and an explanatory theory of transformational learning. By blending practical design inquiry with conceptual frames of liminality, equity as rigor, and institutional isomorphism, scholars can build a more comprehensive understanding of how doctoral education and potentially other forms of professional and organizational learning fosters meaningful change at both the individual and collective levels. This line of inquiry provides a natural bridge to the following section, which considers the study's methodological and contextual limitations.

Limitations

As with any qualitative case study, this inquiry has boundaries that shape what can be concluded. The first limitation relates to scope. The analysis focused on two cohorts (Cohort 4 and Cohort 5) within a single doctoral program. Their experiences offer rich insights into how course design influences belonging, adult development, and equity praxis. However, they do not represent every professional doctorate or even every student in the International EdD. Other cohorts may have encountered different dynamics depending on faculty assignments, global context, or evolving program structures. In this sense, the findings illuminate how anchoring forces (belonging, trust, and developmental supports) and activating forces (equity praxis and

inquiry into fairness and inclusion) were experienced in these cohorts, while acknowledging that these dynamics may vary over time and across contexts.

A second boundary lies in data sources. While the study drew on diverse sources (interviews, observations, artifacts, and syllabi), participation was voluntary, and not all perspectives were captured. The analysis reflects patterns across this data, rather than providing a comprehensive account of every student's experience.

It is also important to acknowledge the researcher's positionality. As both a staff member within the Office of Online Learning, Academic Outreach, and Academic Innovation (OLAOAI) and a doctoral researcher, I brought insider knowledge that provided valuable context and access. At the same time, my dual role had the potential to shape interpretation. To mitigate bias and uphold trustworthiness, I used transparent coding, triangulated across sources, and employed pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

Finally, transferability is naturally limited. The International EdD is an Off-Model program with distinctive design features: collapsed syllabi, global learning exchanges, and an emphasis on equity as rigor. These conditions may not be replicated in every institutional setting. The value of this study lies not in generalizability but in the insight it offers about what becomes possible when programs approach course design with intentionality, coherence, and a developmental orientation toward adult learning.

Even with these boundaries, the study offers meaningful insights into how course design can shape transformational learning in professional doctorates. Acknowledging the scope and context does not diminish its contribution; instead, it sharpens understanding of the conditions under which transformation occurred. With these contours in view, I close by returning to the

study's focus on practice and considering what the International EdD reveals about designing programs that are both rigorous and equity-informed.

Conclusion

This study began with a question of whether online professional doctorates could be designed for more than efficiency. As the literature notes, many programs replicate transactional routines such as discussion boards that echo agreement, quizzes that test recall, and assignments that feel detached from real-world work. Against that backdrop, the International EdD positioned course design as a lever for transformation. By embedding trust, reflection, and an emphasis on as *equity praxis* (into its curriculum, the program offered a different possibility: that doctoral study could be both doable and developmental, both rigorous and relational.

The findings showed that this possibility was not theoretical. The learning environment, structured around belonging and recognition, created psychological safety for students to persist. Opportunities embedded in coursework—such as data cycles, collaborative analyses, and reflective assignments provided practice grounds for developing leadership capacity. Moreover, equity learning, treated not as a supplement but as rigor, encouraged candidates to apply their learning toward organizational and systemic improvement. Together, these three strands — environment, opportunities, and equity praxis — formed the helix of transformation.

Building on Militello et al.'s (2023) discussion of equity as a centrifugal force in EdD program design, this study extended that idea to conceptualize the dynamic interplay between anchoring and activating forces. The environment and opportunities functioned as anchoring forces (centripetal, inward pull) that held students in community when the work was heavy. At the same time, equity-oriented practice acted as an activating force (centrifugal, outward push), encouraging participants to examine inequities within their professional contexts and apply the

learning toward improvement. Opportunities created motion between these two, allowing growth to spiral rather than stall. This extension is not a theoretical flourish; it mirrors how participants described their journeys. Some spoke of being sustained by trust when they considered leaving; others spoke of being compelled to act on questions of fairness and inclusion they had once avoided.

The implications of this work extend beyond a single program. For practitioners, the study highlights that adult learners require more than just content—they need course design that respects their contexts, broadens their perspectives, and treats inclusion as an integral part of the learning experience. For institutions, it suggests that Off-Model programs can serve as spaces of innovation, but only when equity-informed practice and adult development are prioritized alongside financial sustainability. For researchers, it points to the need for longitudinal and comparative studies that further test the braided framework of environment, opportunities, and equity praxis.

At its core, though, this study is about possibility. The International EdD demonstrates that course design can move doctoral study from transactional compliance to transformational leadership development. It demonstrates that equity praxis can serve as a basis for rigor rather than rhetoric. It suggests that professional doctorates, when intentionally designed, can prepare leaders not only for degree completion but also for meaningful organizational and systemic improvement.

This lesson is timely for ECU. At University Day, UNC System President Peter Hans urged campuses to “take control of our own future” rather than cede it to external forces. The International EdD offers a blueprint for doing so. As an Off-Model program, it demonstrates that innovation can be both financially sustainable and pedagogically bold, centering adult

development and equity-informed design in ways that directly support student persistence and success. Off-model programs also serve as incubators for innovation, providing spaces where faculty can test new pedagogies, meet the needs of niche learner populations, and pilot ideas that may later influence the broader university. In this sense, the International EdD is more than a case study; it is evidence that ECU already holds, within its own structures, a model for the kind of future its leaders envision.

The helix metaphor captures this trajectory. The spiral reminds us that growth is not linear; it requires both being held and being propelled, and that it is as much about community as it is about courage. For Cohort 4, this meant leaving the program not simply as completers but as leaders prepared to engage their contexts differently. For Cohort 5, it meant entering a program where belonging was immediate and where the expectation of fairness and inclusion was clear from the start.

As one ECU leader often reminds us, "it is not about being right; it is about getting it right." This distinction captures the more profound contribution of the International EdD. The program models how leadership is not an individual performance of expertise but a collective pursuit of improvement and inclusion. By designing coursework that centers on fairness and collaboration—what the literature often refers to as *equity praxis*, the program honored identity, sustained community, and demonstrated what it means to "get it right": to involve those closest to the issues in shaping solutions and to weave multiple sources of knowledge into transformational practice. In this sense, the International EdD is not simply a degree program, but an incubator of a leadership stance committed to continuous learning and improvement.

The trajectory of this program also reflects the potential of Off-Model initiatives at ECU to serve as incubators of innovation in graduate education. Autonomy and iterative improvement

enabled the International EdD to evolve into an exemplary, equity-informed model of doctoral preparation—rigorous, relational, and transformative. At the same time, this model is not a universal fit; it thrives because of intentional design choices, a committed faculty, and a clear developmental stance. As such, the International EdD should be read not as a template to be replicated wholesale, but as an illustration of what becomes possible when course design functions as a lever for meaningful change. The enduring lesson is that "getting it right" in doctoral education requires designing for belonging, adult development, and fairness-oriented practice at every turn.

As I reflect on this work, I return to the focus of practice that animated it: the tension between transactional and transformational design. This study does not claim to resolve that tension once and for all, but it demonstrates that it can be navigated deliberately through design. When programs braid environment, opportunity, and equity praxis—the anchoring and activating forces of the helix—they move doctoral education from efficiency to inclusion, from compliance to transformation. In doing so, they not only produce more graduates but also cultivate more leaders who are willing to question, reflect, and act with fairness and integrity. That is the contribution of the International EdD and the legacy this dissertation hopes to advance.

Coda

My connection to ECU began long before this dissertation. As an undergraduate, I was drawn into the life of the university through leadership and involvement—serving on the Conduct Board, working as an Orientation Assistant, and building community as a Resident Advisor. These roles gave me more than résumé lines; they shaped how I saw myself in relation to others. At ECU, I first began to think of myself not only as my parents' daughter but as a

citizen. Higher education became, for me, not just about content knowledge but about the deep learning that comes from reflection, community, and responsibility.

That recognition carried into my career and eventually to the International EdD. In working with the program, I saw something different: leaders grappling with equity, reflecting on identity, and practicing new forms of leadership. This was not an online program that settled for efficiency; it invited transformation. I realized that while ECU had long been a leader in the quantity of online education, we still had room to grow in its quality. The International EdD showed me what is possible when course design honors adult learners' contexts, needs, and leadership potential.

Through this dissertation, I found language for what I had sensed for years: higher education must not only "do student development" for 18–22-year-olds, but also "do adult development" for those returning with decades of experience. However, higher education rarely names or expects growth for adult learners in the same way. All students deserve intentionality, care, and the expectation of transformation. Designing for adult development is not optional; it is the lever that moves programs from transaction to transformation.

My own journey mirrors the dual forces I studied: held in place by belonging and trust, and propelled outward by the call to equity praxis. Like the helix, my growth has not been linear but spiraled, layered, and deepened over time. The strands of environment, opportunity, and equity are now braided into how I see my vocation and into my conviction about what higher education must become.

This dissertation concludes with a stance: online course design is not merely a technical exercise, but a transformational act. When design embeds belonging, honors identity, and treats equity as rigor, it becomes the lever that sustains persistence and launches leaders into systemic

change. Progress in higher education requires anticipating student needs, designing with equity as a core stance, and building systems that are both responsible and transformative. What this program demonstrates is that higher education not only has the opportunity but also the responsibility to design for transformation, because to do less is to shortchange both students and society.

To educate without transformation is to prepare leaders for yesterday, not tomorrow.

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APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
Willis Building · Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office **252-744-2914** · Fax **252-744-2284** ·
rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/

Notification of Exempt Certification

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: Jennifer Horne
CC: Matthew Militello
Date: 12/18/2023
Re: UMCIRB 23-002481
Theory to Practice: A Case Study of How EdD Students Experience Their Learning and How Their Learning Impacts Practice

I am pleased to inform you that your research submission has been certified as exempt on 12/18/2023. This study is eligible for Exempt Certification under category # 2b.

It is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted in the manner reported in your application and/or protocol, as well as being consistent with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report and your profession.

This research study does not require any additional interaction with the UMCIRB unless there are proposed changes to this study. Any change, prior to implementing that change, must be submitted to the UMCIRB for review and approval. The UMCIRB will determine if the change impacts the eligibility of the research for exempt status. If more substantive review is required, you will be notified within five business days.

Document	Description
Consent form(0.01)	Consent Forms
Draft set of question types to be asked(0.01)	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
Horne Dissertation Proposal(0.01)	Study Protocol or Grant Application
Recruitment email(0.01)	Recruitment Documents/Scripts

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

IRB00000705 East Carolina U IRB #1 (Biomedical) IORG0000418
IRB00003781 East Carolina U IRB #2 (Behavioral/SS) IORG0000418

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dear Participant,

I am an EdD Student at East Carolina University in the Educational Leadership department. I am asking you to take part in my research study entitled, “Theory to Practice: A Case Study of How EdD Students Experience Their Learning and How Their Learning Impacts Practice”.

The purpose of this research is to better understand the how students experience their learning in the International EdD K-12 cohort program by doing this research, I hope to learn how you experience the espoused critical design elements of the program and what conditions within the program foster your learning. Additionally, this research seeks to better understand how students use their learning based on critical program design and conditions to inform their professional practice**. Your participation is completely voluntary**.

You are being invited to take part in this research because you are a current International EdD K-12 cohort student or have graduated from the International EdD K-12 cohort program. For this study, I will be a participant observer for course activities and conducting interviews with current International EdD K-12 cohort students. The amount of time it will take you to complete an individual interview is up to 60 minutes. The participant observation may last for the duration of the course or activity. During the observation, I am asking for your permission to record your activities, responses, and other observable behaviors. With your consent, there is no other action you would need to complete for participating in the observation of course and course activities for this study.

Additionally, if you agree to take part in this research you will be asked if I can also conduct a follow-up interview related to my observations. Again, participation in any portion of this study is completely voluntary. You may consent to the observation but decline the interview or decline both observation and interview. In both the observation and interview, I will be looking for how the critical course design is present, executed, and how students react in the moment. With follow-up interviews, I will be asking questions related to how the critical program design elements affect your learning and how you have experienced the learning. I am interested in how this program affects learning from your perspective.

If you agree to take part in this research, you will be asked if I can observe you during courses and course activities. Additionally, you may be asked if you would like to participate in a follow-up interview related to my observations. Observations and interviews may be audio and video recorded during certain course activities and individual follow-up interviews. However, for your confidentiality, audio and video records will be deleted once transcripts of the encounter are created.

This research is overseen by the ECU Institutional Review Board. Therefore some of the IRB members or the IRB staff may need to review my research data. Personal identifiable information will not be recorded in transcripts and the information you provide will not be linked to you. Therefore, your responses cannot be traced back to you by anyone, including me.

If you have questions about your rights when taking part in this research, call the ECU University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at phone number 252-744-

2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may call the Director for Human Research Protections, at 252-744-2914.

You do not have to take part in this research, and you can stop at any time. If you decide you are willing to take part in this study, please check the AGREE box below for all applicable statements.

Thank you for taking the time to participate in my research.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Horne, Principal Investigator

Please mark each applicable option in with a check.

AGREE	DISAGREE	Consent Statement
		I consent to being observed during online courses and other course activities.
		I consent to being interviewed during this study.
		I consent to **both** being observed and interviewed during this study.

_____

Participant's Name (PRINT) Signature Date

APPENDIX C: WEBEXHANGE AGENDAS

Sample A. Cohort 4 WebExchange

To adjust your document so that it fits with 1-inch margins on all sides, follow these steps in Microsoft Word:

1. Go to the "Layout" tab at the top of your Word window.
2. Click on "Margins" in the Page Setup group.
3. Select "Normal" (which sets all margins—top, bottom, left, and right—to 1 inch). If "Normal" is not set to 1 inch on all sides, choose "Custom Margins" at the bottom of the drop-down menu.
4. In the Page Setup dialog box, set Top, Bottom, Left, and Right margins to 1".
5. Click "OK" to apply the changes.

This will ensure that all content in your document, including the EdD Web Exchange International Cohort IV agenda, fits within 1-inch margins on every page.

EdD Web Exchange International Cohort IV

Saturday, January 6, 2024 (12:00-3:00 pm EDT)

Annice's Zoom

Outcomes	Agreements

Participants will: Engage in a design thinking activity facilitated by an International EdD alumnus! Unpack “growing injustice” images for understanding leadership equity. Review and plan your spring semester based on the syllabus. Develop a plan of action with your coach to complete the Chapter 5 artifact for the spring semester.	Be patient with each other and technology. Speak your truth to your level of comfort. Support equitable dialogue. Take risks in engaging in conversations.

Time	Activity	Links/Details
12:00 pm	**Welcome & Overview** *Happy New Year*	Matt
12:10 pm	**Dynamic Mindfulness**	Lena
12:15 pm	**Personal Narrative** *New Year’s Resolution or A Retrospective?* What are the lessons from this past year that will guide you in 2024?	Matt
12:40 pm	**Liberatory Design Thinking** Design Thinking with an Equity Twist	Janette Hernandez

	Leader's Framework (Snowden & Boone, 2017) https://www.nationalequityproject.org/frameworks/liberatory-design	
1:25 pm	**Growing Injustice** Unpacking Graphics (four levels of development) Drago-Severson et al., 2023	Larry
2:05 pm	**Spring Semester** Syllabus Overview (see Organizational Maps/Logs & Shared Annotations) Closing Affirmations	Annice
2:20 pm	**Coach Group Planning/Closing** Planning for the semester: Annotations, Org Theory Course, PAR Cycle Two, & Chapter Five	Coaching Groups

The Last New Year's Resolution by Kazumi Chin

The very last mammoth was just like the others,
except more lonely. The very last tortilla chip
makes me feel guilty. The very last line
of the poem changes everything about
what came before. On the very last day

of any semester, if I liked my class, I buy them
cookies. Every year, someone hears the very last
words of any given language, and then
it sinks into the mud of colonialism. White
soldiers gave every last Indian at Fort Pitt
a blanket, to keep them warm. The very last
samurai was white. The very last thing
I wanted this poem to be about was white
people. But that didn't last too long. Last
year, I wavered between whispering
and screaming. The very latest from
the western front: a lasting quiet. The radio
was never much of a conversationalist.
The very last tape I ever listened to
scrambled like an egg at brunch
in Pittsburgh on a Sunday, with
the very last people I'd ever expected
to be at brunch with. Who knew I'd love
so many white people. The very last story
my grandmother told me was about a boy
named Tsutomo. He was born from a peach
called America. The very last place his father
thought he'd ever be. The very last ornament

we hang from our tree each year is a face.
The very last year I spent Christmas with
my whole family was in 6th grade. I hated
my whole family that year. To the very last
drop of blood in my body, I wanted them
out. Now I want to bring all these Pittsburgh
people home with me. Take them to meet
my family. With every pixel of every word
I bleed. I never wanted to hate my family.
Or anything at all. I want last year to be
the very last time that I ever hate anything.
Even when white people are killing black
people and sealing off the street. I will hold
so many hands. To the very last finger
resting on every last trigger of every
last gun. Listen to me, I am loving, I am loving,
I am giving so much fucking love to you.

Kazumi Chin is a poet from El Cerrito, California. He earned his MFA in poetry from the University of Pittsburgh and his BA in creative writing from the University of California, Riverside. His most recent work can be found in *Twelfth House, Barrelhouse Magazine, Wu Wei Fashion Mag,* and *The Ilanot Review*.

Sample B. Cohort 5 Pre-session WebExchange Agenda

International EdD

PRE-SESSION THREE: AUTOBIOGRAPHY

May 18, 2024 9:00am (ET)

https://zoom.us/j/9395455149

Pre-Reading & Podcast

Guajardo, F., & Guajardo, M. (2013). The power of plática. *Reflections: Public rhetoric, civic writing and service learning, 13*(2), 159-164. [Sent as email attachment]

Militello, M. (2008). *EDUC 865 Podcast: Storytelling with Francisco Guajardo*. University of Massachusetts. [https://vimeo.com/705378456]

The summer course syllabus (which you do not yet have) includes essential questions, learning outcomes, and meta-cognitive and meta-affective reflections that guide our work.

We excerpted the questions and the learning outcomes from the summer syllabus.

Essential Questions

- What tools and frameworks can I use to examine who I am and how I do my work?
- How can I prepare myself for the doctoral program? Specifically, what do I know and acknowledge about (my)self?

- How can you support yourself and others through the journey (i.e., being a critical friend and a warm demander for writing)?

Metacognitive/Meta-Affective Questions

- How do the instructors model practices and documentation/evidence collection that are useful for my practice as educational leaders?
- How can I best transfer frameworks, protocols, and learning to my practice? What feels possible?

Learning Outcomes (from course syllabus for summer)	**Agreements**
Develop the knowledge and skills of cornerstone EdD practices by focusing on a set of practices that support our philosophical stance about learning: CLE processes, dynamic mindfulness (DM), arts integration, and design thinking. Cultivate relational trust as a cohort. Analyze texts to broaden and deepen your understanding of the CLE axioms and the importance of digital story telling. Write a story with a prompt focused on the ecology of self.	Be patient with each other and technology Speak your truth to your level of comfort Support equitable dialogue Take risks in engaging in conversations

Facilitators: Matt, Marcos, Lynda, Annice, Larry, & Maenette

Time	Activity	Facilitator

9:00am	**Welcome & Overview** *Dynamic Mindfulness*	Summer Instructional Team
9:10am	**Mustard Seed (Ecology of Self)** *Making it Last: A Mustard Seed Pantoum* ***Quick Write Activity**: What is your Mustard Seed? Write a story about your Mustard Seed. What are the sources or seeds that brought you to where you stand now as a leader? Explore the story of one of those sources that has informed your leadership.*	Matt
9:30am	**Engage in Storytelling** *Conversation about your leadership stories* *Reflect with Pláticas & PodCast*	Small Group Discussions
9:55am	**Digital Storytelling for Learning** *You must first understand yourself to be of service to others* *What is your story?* *Who is telling your story?* *Who are you telling your story to?*	Marcos
10:05am	**Sharing Our Stories**	Marcos, Larry, & Matt
10:25am	**Preparation for Telling your Story (& Digital Story)** Geography of Self Bring an *Endowed Object* to offer and share in Bangkok Secure your Mustard Seed story	Lynda & Matt

	Write Autobiographies (See Assignment below) Bring artifacts (photos, images, videos, music)	
	Final Summer Prep *Travel & Site Logistics*	Summer
10:35am	*Readings*	Instructional
	Syllabus	Team
	Other- Q & A	
10:45am	**Closing**	Annice

Mustard Seed

Making It Last (A Mustard Seed Pantoum)

By

Lee Francis

There are gardens everywhere we look and they are green and they are golden. We must be careful to let them tangle and twist in the sunshine unafraid to step into the unknown stories that wrap around each leaf and stem. and unafraid of hard times, always unfinished, always reaching to the sky.

We must be careful to let them tangle and twist in the sunshine these mustard seeds. They will grow tall and joyous from strong soil and unafraid of hard times. Always unfinished and always reaching to the sky, they will blossom and grow in ways we are not even able to imagine.

These mustard seeds. They will grow tall and joyous. From strong soil, they emerge with prayers on their leaves which we will eat and form stories; they will blossom and grow in ways we are not even able to imagine from months ago when we first pressed our hands into the earth.

They emerge. With prayers on their leaves (which we will eat and form stories) these ancient plant dreams remind us that we are also mustard seeds from months ago when we first pressed our hands into the earth and began a journey of growing. And now we understand:

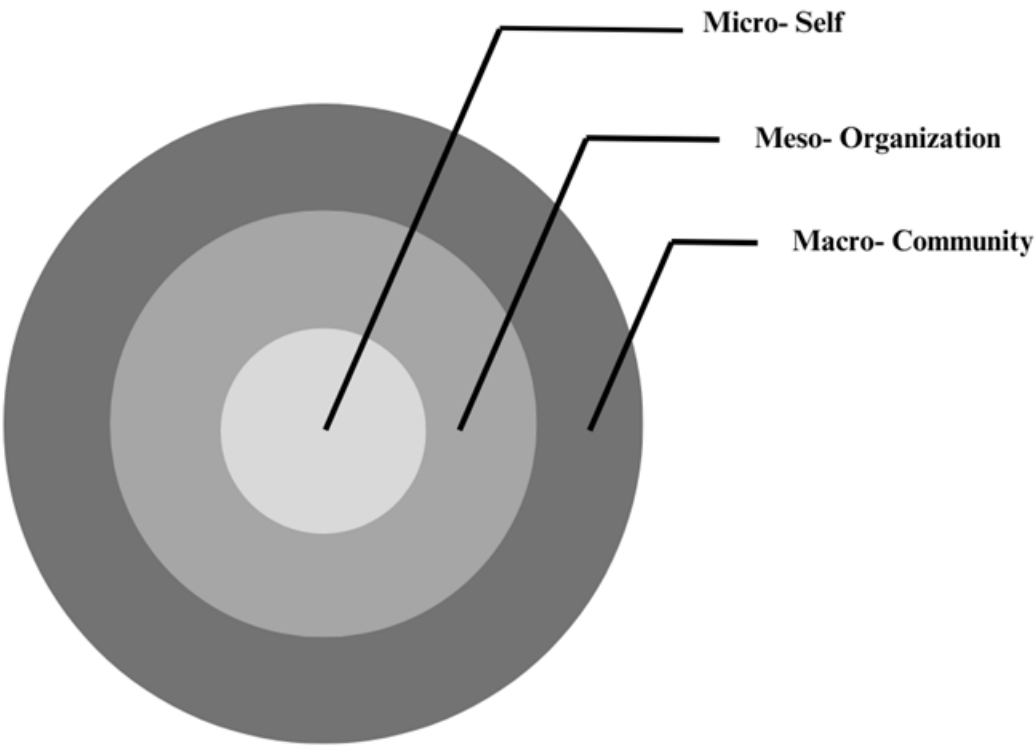
these ancient plant dreams remind us that we are also mustard seeds unafraid to step into the unknown stories, that wrap around each leaf and stem, and begin a journey of growing. And now we understand there are gardens everywhere we look and they are green. And they are golden.

https://vimeo.com/385311398

Dr. Lee Francis IV is an award-winning poet and writer, whose work revolves around education and how Native Peoples and Indigenous communities are represented in popular culture. For more information visit: **https://redplanetbooksncomics.com/**

CLE ECOLOGIES

Ecologies



ENDOWED OBJECT

Summer 2024

Choosing an endowed personal object to tell the story is a way to connect the storyteller to something tangible and tell a part of his/her/their personal narrative through talking about the object.

Endowing the object means that you bestow special meaning to the object. An object does not have to be expensive to be of great importance and personal value. Some objects are highly symbolic and function as metaphors for events in our lives or relationships and qualities we value. Some objects may be negative in nature and remind us of painful or difficult issues or times (a losing lottery ticket to the gambler, the "dear John letter," etc.). In the theatre, characters handle "props" that have great meaning to them; the King's crown, the magic sword, the wedding ring, etc. Playwrights use props to help tell the story in a visual, immediate way.

We all have objects in our lives that connect to our own personal stories and narratives. Pick an object to use in the telling of an important personal story, and make sure it is one that connects and illustrates the story you want to tell.

Bring one object that represents a part of history or current event that has significance, or one that represents a powerful relationship or personal turning point. Please bring objects, not images, articles or photographs, as they are too literal. The object represents a possibility for symbolic curation as the objects through this new lens of endowment. Inevitably people will make choices that are meaningful to them, and they will endow the objects with emotional meaning as they present to the group.

For our use, we will have each Research Group present endowed objects on different days as a part of our opening.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY ASSIGNMENT

You take yourself wherever you go. In order to deeply understand yourself as a leader, you need to reflect on yourself as a person, as a family member, as an educator. Since you bring yourself to this work, we know that your stories of self are the cornerstone of your values of building and sustaining equity in schools and community.

We are expecting you to write an ***autobiography of self*** *that is personal and professional. The autobiography should be about 3-4 pages. Secondly, in the summer session, you produce a* ***digital story of self.*** *Writing the autobiography helps you prepare for the digital story. Both of these you share with the instructional team, your research group, and your coach.*

Analyze the elements of your personal and professional story in the four quadrants. Then use this analysis to construct an autobiography about what attributes or characteristics are most salient for understanding who you are and who you are as a leader.

Historical Self	*Biological Self*
Cultural Self	*Political Self*

GEOGRAPHY OF SELF

Historical SELF	**Biological SELF**
What major historical events (micro or macro) impacted your life? What local (micro) and larger (macro) events have been close to you spatially, geographically, physically, and emotionally? What is significant about the geographic spaces (power of place) that live in currently or lived in historically? If you have access to information, do a generational analysis (your ancestors) of what	Describe your physical makeup and genetic composition and, from what you currently know, elaborate on where you come from (e.g., father, mother, grandparents, etc.). Present pictures of yourself as a youth and compare them to the present; how have you changed? What is your genetic make-up and how do you identify yourself? What do you see as

brought you to the place/space in which you find yourself? What was your first experiences in understanding race and diversity?	your dominant composition comes from and prominent characteristics? If you have children or know your relatives, do you see this in other relatives or your children?
Cultural SELF How has your ethnic, social, and cultural self defined who you are? How has/does your racial or physical identity interact or connect to the communities where you live, work, and play? What cultural experiences shaped your values and beliefs? Have cultural experiences as an adult changed your beliefs and values over time? What are the context and conditions that have molded your cultural identity? What does diversity mean to you?	**Political SELF** How have local (micro) and national (macro) politics shaped your values and beliefs? How do you deal with conflict? What was your first political action (test your memory)? How do you define power and how do you use it? What does "standing up for justice" mean to you?

APPENDIX D: IDENTITY ARTIFACT PROMPTS AND INSTRUCTIONS

Mandala Protocol: An Exercise in Self-Reflection

May this work challenge you toward

New frontiers that will emerge

As you begin to approach them,

Calling forth from you the full force

And depth of your undiscovered gifts.

Excerpt from For A New Position by John O'Donohue

A mandala is a map – often spiritual – in this case, a map of you and what has influenced you. Since the personal and the professional always intersect, to understand self as leader requires inquiry and reflection. As a leader, you can revisit the experience of developing a mandala and re-learn and re-tell the "big story, your story." From the guided storytelling, put words or sketches on a graphic that represent your personal mandala as you think through the four quadrants. Note: The language of the group may be added to English version. The language in this mandala is Native Hawaiian.

Sketch your personal Mandala as you the facilitator guides your inquiry through the quadrants and questions below. Often a mandala represents what cannot be explained in words or language. The experience of developing a personal mandala can be revisited to "keep relearning and retelling the big story" (Herman, 2013, p. 389).

The facilitator uses the prompts to (slowly and intentionally) guide the participants in inquiry about self, relationships, building community, and the whole self, which includes identifying one's moral imperatives. The facilitator urges participants to draw images or write phrases or words to respond.

Quadrant I: My Storyline	**Quadrant II: Relationship**
Critical moments in your life/your history/a succession of stories Consider who your family/ancestors are. Where do you come from? What are key points on your journey line Define how you see the work that you do today. *"Learn and express your story. Deepen self-awareness by seeking opposite experiences*" (Herman, 2013, p. 388).	*Associations & connections—people, perspective, passion, power* Who are you in relationship with? Consider the quality of the daily relationships that ignite your passion. What do these relationships feel like? Sound like? Taste like? (elements of safety and play?) To whom are you most accountable? "*Diverse perspectives of school leadership will lead to richer development of educational theory and practice"* (Benham, 2002, p. 134).
Quadrant IV: The WHOLE, the big picture	**Quadrant III: Building Community**
Care for the land and for all that nourishes you What is the change you want to be in the world?	*The land, ocean, sky and "holding place" where everything and everyone can flourish* Who are included in your networks? How do you "hold space" for others?

What is your moral imperative? Allow yourself to wonder about how you see the big picture and how you contribute to the whole? "*The more completely we understand the big story telling us into being, the better able we are to respond creatively to the challenges of our moment"* (Herman, 2013, p. 133).	Who "holds space" for you? Consider all the "webs" of connection in your life Who are you responsible to and for? *"What counts is how much we give to our communities"* (Benham, 2002, p. 138).

Two sources of information about the mandala.

The Medicine Wheel (Benham, 2002)	**The Mandala Structure of the Primal Quest** (Herman, 2013)
 Figure 1: Key Figures of a Community of Leadership: A Native/Indigenous Perspective *Image found on page 159.*	

“The demarcations between leader and follower are fluid and flexible. Leadership, therefore, can be described as a noun, a person or a group of people, as well as a verb, an action, because it is both the quality of character and the activity. This view of leadership is a process that is enacted within a cultural context that is place and time bound” (p. 138). “The promise [of leadership] is symbolized in the Medicine Wheel and the story "Coyote Eyes." What most people do not know is that the Plains people have used the Medicine Wheel in the Big Horn Mountains in South Dakota for thousands of years as a place for prayer. It is a circle composed of large stones. shaped like a wheel, which symbolizes the life cycle of all native peoples. The medicine wheel teaches personal balance, wholeness with family and interconnectedness with community, and responsibility for nature. It values personal volition, reflection on one's	*Image found on page 118.* “Reflecting on the questing human individual as he or she emerges within the primal community, we can identify four primary values and processes that constitute the necessary, minimal coordinates of the quest. My suggestion is that this structure functions like a Jungian archetype, a deeply rooted way of thinking and behaving, that becomes luminous - illuminating itself- as it unfolds over time” (p. 117). “This primordial four-part dynamic structure can be represented, ap-propriately enough, by one of the oldest and most universal symbols of the whole - a mandala (Sanskrit for "circle"), which is typically represented as a circle cut into four quarters (see diagram, page 118). The term was popu-larized by C. G. Jung, who noticed the appearance of mandalas in religious and healing traditions across time and cultures, from Paleolithic petroglyphs and Navajo sand paintings to

own hidden gifts, and living up to the vision of one's native beliefs and values. The medicine wheel has been telling the truth about change for centuries. That is to say, that everything is in a state of constant change, of things coming together and things coming apart. Change is never random or accidental and is always necessary and connected" (p. 141). "The lessons we have learned about leadership from the medicine wheel (the foundation of the preceding model) is that what it means and what it looks like emerges from the life experiences of a continually changing context. Within this system of natural and harmonious changing patterns, leadership, like a partici-patory art form, is fluid, flexible, and relational. Community leaders emerge situationally and temporarily to meet the challenges of the day. V.A. Howard (1996) resonates with this understanding stating, "Leadership is neither	medieval alchemy and objects of meditation in early Christianity and Tibetan Buddhism. In all contexts the mandala seems to represent the connection between the whole and the part; the tension between the unity of existence and the infinite ways in which the whole can be fragmented. Primal traditions can help bring down to earth the rather abstract dis-cussion of the epistemology of the quest" (p. 117). "Only humans have such an expanded realm of freedom; only humans are "determiners" and only humans have a serious prob-lem in finding their place in the whole" (p. 119). "The only truly human way forward is through more knowledge; there is no going back. The four quarters of the mandala represent the distinctiveness of each of these elements. The surrounding circle represents their interconnectedness in continual dynamic interaction, converging in the unity of the single cen-ter point - the quest itself… We

univocal nor readily systematized for scientific investigation. Like creativity, intelligence, or human potential, leadership is an everyday notion of variable meaning and application rather than a scientific concept of fixed meaning" (p. 111)" (p. 159).	need to recognize that all are in constant dynamic interaction - counteracting, complementing, and balancing one another…As we self-consciously cultivate the mandala dynamic we can start to see its potential for catalyzing a rapid dramatic shift in personal and collective awareness" (p. 119).

Sample B

Directions for Constructing a Norigae

Norigae -- Korean **(** 노리개**)** is a typical and traditional Korean accessory used in hanbok, a woman's traditional dress, which can be hung on (coat strings) of a woman's *jeogori* (upper part of the garment) or on a *chima* (skirt).

The *norigae* functions as a decorative pendant (a fashion accessory) and is often considered a good-luck charm to bring something such as eternal youth, wealth or many sons (depending on its shape). Usually, the *norigae* from the parents' or in-laws' home was passed down to descendants (see images on left). Jiha Moon, an Atlanta-based Korean-American artist, used the norigae to construct memory pieces (images on the right).
http://jihamoon.com/albums/norigae/content/hosoon/

Your responsibility is to construct a memory piece similar to a norigae that will act as a talisman/woman for you during this last year of the doctoral program. A talisman is an object that is thought to have magical powers and bring good luck.

You can use any materials you like to construct this object. We will bring fabric, yarn, some objects, and other general art materials. However, if you have special objects that you wish to "endow" with special powers or fabric or other possibilities for constructing the norigae, please

bring them to Bangkok. If you wish to have objects from others in the cohort or someone else special to you who has helped on the journey, be in touch with them so you can add to norigae

You will be taking this home with you to hang somewhere that will see

APPENDIX E: CODEBOOK AND ANALYTIC PROCESS

Section 1. Preliminary Codebook (Excerpt)

Code	Definition	Anchor Citations	Notes / Where it Shows Up
Transformational learning	Learning that fundamentally shifts a student's perspective, assumptions, or identity, often through critical reflection and disorienting dilemmas.	Mezirow (1991); Taylor (2007)	Cited throughout Chapter 2; central to the focus of practice.
Adult development	Growth across personal, professional, and cognitive domains that continues through adulthood.	Kegan (1994); Merriam & Bierema (2014)	Used in framing online doctoral growth trajectories.

Belonging	A felt sense of acceptance, inclusion, and connectedness in a learning environment.	Strayhorn (2018); Vaccaro & Newman (2016)	Emerges in data through cohort practices.
Equity	Commitment to fairness, inclusion, and justice in learning processes and outcomes.	Ladson-Billings (1995); Shields (2010)	Highlighted in leadership and FoP sections.
Reflective practice	Ongoing, intentional self-examination of one's assumptions, actions, and impacts.	Schön (1983); Brookfield (1995)	Critical in dissertation and leadership development.
Collaborative judgment	Shared sense-making and decision-making among cohorts and faculty.	Guajardo et al. (2016)	Connects to program design and leadership practice.

(Excerpted from Preliminary Code Book, 2024.)

Section 2. Coding Process and Audit Trail

Step	Data Source	Depth	Purpose	Audit Notes
1	Interviews (2 transcripts)	Deep (line-by-line)	Establish participant voice and meaning-making.	Used 3-pass coding (Descriptive, In Vivo, Pattern); flagged anchor quotes by RQ.
2	Leadership Development Essays (Cohort 4)	Deep	Trace growth trajectories over 3 years.	Focused on perspective shift, adult development, equity stance.
3	Observations / Field Notes	Medium-Deep	Triangulate what students did vs. what they said.	Coded in event-level chunks for rituals, belonging, and presence.
4	Digital Stories	Light-Medium	Capture symbolic imagery of	Motif coding (trees, storms,

			leadership journeys.	bridges, meals).
5	Researcher Reflexive Memos	Light	Provide context and positionality.	Coded for belonging, vulnerability, environment.
6	Program Syllabi	Light	Document intentional design.	Mapped to RQ1 (learning environment).

(Excerpted from Coding Plan and Audit Trail, 2024.)

Section 3. Sample Coded Excerpts

Text Excerpt	First-Cycle Codes	Pattern Code	RQ Alignment
"Sharing personal histories shifted how I show up for colleagues."	Descriptive: personal histories; In Vivo: shifted how I show up; Process: repositioning self	Identity work (authenticity as leadership)	RQ2 (adult development); RQ3 (equity/action)
"My cohort pushed me to sit with discomfort instead of rushing to solutions."	Descriptive: cohort push; Process: sitting with discomfort	Developmental stretch (disequilibrium → growth)	RQ1 (environment); RQ2 (growth)
"Now I bring that into my school meetings—pausing, asking, listening."	Descriptive: pausing, asking, listening; Process: application in practice	Transfer of practice (collaborative judgment)	RQ3 (leadership practice, systemic change)

(Excerpts from Interview 1 & 2 Coding Tables, 2024.)

Note. This appendix integrates excerpts from the preliminary codebook, coding audit trail, and two early interview analyses. It demonstrates the iterative, multi-source coding process that

informed the study's final categories and themes. Full analytic files, coding matrices, and memos are retained on file per UMCIRB Protocol 23-002481.

Section 4 : Sample of Codebook and Definitions

Theme	Category	Codes & Subcodes (with Definitions)
Transformational Learning	Personal and Professional Growth	• Transformation – Shift in perspective, new understanding, change in beliefs. • Critical Reflection – Examining assumptions, challenging biases, promoting equity.
Transformational Learning	Dialogue-Based Learning	• Sharing with Others – Collaborative storytelling and dialogue. • Listening to Others – Practicing empathy and feedback. • Building Trust – Establishing relational safety. • Engaging in Discussions – Dialogue as mutual inquiry.
Transformational Learning	Learner-Centered	• Active Learning – Engaging directly with material through inquiry and experimentation. • Learner-Focused Leadership – Centering student needs and agency. • Learner Engagement – Sustained participation and ownership. • Learner Autonomy – Independent, self-directed inquiry.
Transformational Learning	Contextual Learning	• Navigating Educational Systems – Understanding institutional contexts. • Personal Growth and Identity – Integrating personal and cultural backgrounds. • Cultural and Religious Background – Reflection on heritage and beliefs. • Family and Upbringing – Recognizing formative influences.
Transformational Learning	Learning and Change	• Methodologies for Change – Applying theories and tools for practice transformation. • Reflection and Action – Linking awareness to applied leadership.
Emotional Labor and Leadership	Emotional Well-being	• Emotional Connection to Work – Meaningful attachment to purpose. • Emotional Challenges of Leadership – Navigating vulnerability and stress.

		• Emotional Regulation and Self-Care – Sustaining wellness under pressure. • Emotional Connection to Family – Balancing personal and professional empathy. • Empathy and Understanding – Compassionate leadership practice.
Mentorship and Coaching	Support and Guidance	• Supportive Relationships – Mentorship, coaching, and peer support. • Imitation/Modeling – Replicating effective practices observed in leaders. • Cognitive Modeling – Internalizing thought processes and reflection patterns.
Balancing Practitioner-Researcher Roles	Integrating Research and Practice	• Navigating Systems – Balancing life-world and systems-world tensions. • Adapting and Thriving – Managing change in complex systems. • Maintaining Neutrality and Avoiding Bias – Ethical stance in inquiry. • Questioning and Understanding Systems – Analyzing structures of power. • Understanding Systemic Barriers to Change – Recognizing institutional limitations.
Balancing Practitioner-Researcher Roles	Problem-Centered Learning	• Addressing Real-World Challenges – Grounding inquiry in authentic contexts. • Encouraging Self-Directed Problem-Solving – Empowering practitioner agency. • Reflecting on Problem-Solving Experiences – Learning through action. • Collaborative Problem-Solving – Working with others to co-design solutions. • Developing Solutions and Tools – Translating reflection into action.

APPENDIX F: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction: Thank you for taking the time to speak with me. This interview is part of my dissertation research focused on understanding your experiences in this EdD program. I'm interested in your reflections on your leadership journey. This will take about 30-45 minutes, and our conversation is confidential. With your permission, I'd like to record our conversation. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Opening Question:

1. To start, could you tell me a little about your leadership journey and what brought you to this program?

Research Question 1: Learning Environment & Context

2. We are here in Bangkok for this summer session. Can you talk about what it has been like to be in this specific physical context, away from your home school and usual routines?
3. In what ways, if any, has this environment influenced how you think about your own leadership or the challenges you face in your home context?
4. Can you describe the learning atmosphere here? What words would you use to characterize the interactions between participants?

Research Question 2: Program Opportunities & Feedback

5. The program includes several opportunities for peer review and feedback. Could you describe your experience with these sessions?
6. How has the process of giving and receiving feedback from your colleagues impacted your work or your thinking?
7. Can you recall a specific moment of feedback that helped clarify an idea or gave you more confidence in your plans?

Research Question 3: Equity & Call to Action

8. The program places a strong emphasis on equity. How has this focus on equity shown up in your coursework or activities?
9. Think about an artifact you've created, like your digital story or stance image. How did that activity prompt you to think about your role as a leader in relation to equity?
10. In what ways has the program's "call to action" inspired you to challenge or resist traditional models of leadership in your own practice?

Closing Question:

11. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience in the program that we haven't touched on?

APPENDIX G: CODE-TO-FINDING CROSSWALK

Finding / Category	**Pattern Codes**	**Illustrative First-Cycle Codes**	**Representative Data Sources**
Anchoring Forces: Belonging & Trust	Identity work; Vulnerability as leadership; Relational accountability	"Sharing stories," "telling my own story," "cohort as family," "trust through feedback"	Interviews 1–2, Leadership Essays, WebExchange observations, Reflexive Memos
Anchoring Forces: Adult Development & Scaffolding Growth	Perspective shift; Developmental stretch; Scaffolding support	"Sitting with discomfort," "learning to pause," "feedback cycles," "coaching for risk-taking"	Interviews 2–3, Essays, Program Syllabi
Activating Forces: Equity Praxis in Action	Leading in the in-between; Reflection-to-action; Equity stance	"Navigating tension," "using data for justice," "equity audit," "revising discipline policy"	Digital Stories, Field Notes, Leadership Essays

Activating Forces: Systemic Change & Leadership Agency	Collaborative judgment; Collective action; Institutional agency	"Rewriting policy," "engaging stakeholders," "bringing the work home"	Interviews 4–6, Post-Residency Reflections, Observations
Integrative Themes (across Findings)	Reciprocity between Anchoring and Activating forces	"Balance of support and challenge," "trust enables risk," "reflection leads to praxis"	All data sets triangulated (Interviews, WebExchanges, Essays, Syllabi)

Note. This crosswalk illustrates how first-cycle descriptive, In Vivo, and process codes were clustered into pattern codes and then synthesized into the final categories and findings described in Chapter 5. Each pattern code draws on multiple data sources and analytic memos to support validity and coherence across RQ