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ABSTRACT

Practitioner scholarship encompasses the dispositions and skills necessary for educators to effect change for marginalised students in their local contexts. Ed.D. programmes play a role in helping educators develop these traits. Understanding what practitioner scholarship can look like post-graduation could inform programme planning as well as inspire broader audiences to support these efforts. In this interview study of 11 graduates from one online Ed.D. programme at a research-intensive university, we describe post-graduation enactment of practitioner scholarship. Graduates' proactive stances reflected a social justice-oriented disposition and mastery of skills related to uses of scholarly literature and data.

Educators throughout the Global North and Australasia contend with the growing challenge of meeting the educational needs of diverse student populations. Countries throughout Europe offering refuge to millions of children who have fled war-torn homelands with their families now grapple with financial, ethical and pedagogical challenges related to meeting the educational needs of these children (Eurostat 2017). In the United States, the increasingly White teaching force serves a majority non-White student population in the nation's public schools (Boser 2011, 2014). The growing proportion of non-dominant student groups in Global North and Australasian schools further exacerbates the negative impacts of social injustices already borne by the ethnic and racial groups historically colonised by the dominant, White populations of these countries.

Examples of gaps in educational outcomes include those between racially White groups and: ethnically Surinamese students in Dutch schools (Shewbridge et al. 2010); ethnically Moroccan students in French schools (Brinbaum and Cebolla-Boado 2007); ethnically Ecuadoran students in Spanish schools (Ministero de Educación, Cultura y Deporte 2017); Maori students in New Zealand schools (New Zealand Ministry of Education 2017; Rubie-Davies, Hattie, and Hamilton 2006); aboriginal students in Australian schools (Ford 2013); and Native American students in US schools (Ladson-Billings 2006). Each of these historically marginalised ethnic groups attains fewer and lower education-related outcomes than their counterparts from dominant groups. These achievement gaps between groups have societal costs, both moral and financial. For example, in his economic analyses of the costs of inequitable schooling in the US, Levin (2009) concluded that taxpayer investment in interventions to support the successful education of minoritised students could result in millions of dollars being gained in tax payments from more highly educated workers and saved in costs resulting from health problems and poor health care, crime and crime

prevention and social welfare support. Increasing levels of diversity among student populations further heighten the moral, educational and financial imperatives for educational systems to offer equitable educational experiences to students and to improve the outcomes of historically under-served as well as recently arrived immigrant student populations.

Disparate educational outcomes among student groups result from a host of complex, inter-related challenges that can be conceptualised and addressed using various theoretical and dis-cipline-specific lenses and methodologies. Scholars within the academy are positioned to develop these lenses and methodologies through empirical research and theory building. However, practis-ing educators are best positioned to identify the relevance of specific expertise to issues of inequity in their local schools. Educational practitioners play a critical role in policy implementation and educational change (Lipsky 2010), both of which are necessary to successfully educate changing student populations. Educators who actually determine the quality of educational practice need the knowledge, skills, commitment and agency to make wise decisions about schooling for children and youth.

Doctoral education for in-service educators presents an opportunity for faculty to guide the development of educators who desire to remain in schools and districts after completing their degrees in order to effect change in their contexts (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) 2017). The potential for doctoral education to impact educational inequities resides, in particular, in programmes targeting the development of practitioners positioned to make change in schools. Ed.D. programmes have historically been positioned to develop expertise in the applied field of education (Kennedy, Altman, and Pizano 2018; Shulman et al. 2006) and can particularly effect change when facilitating the development of context-based, or 'practitioner', scholarship (CPED 2017; Lytle and Cochran-Smith 1992; Ravitch and Lytle 2016; Richardson 1994). While systematic self-study and context-based research has yielded positive results, little is known about how educators continue to apply these skills beyond their university-based experiences. This study focuses on the graduates of one doctoral programme aimed at developing the disposi-tions and skills needed by in-service practitioners to systematically study and continuously improve their schools and school systems. It addresses the research questions: 'What does practitioner scholarship look like in practice after students graduate from the Ed.D. programme in Curriculum and Instruction?' and 'What do we learn about factors that shape students' enactments of practi-tioner scholarship?'

What is practitioner scholarship?

We base our work on a theory of change (Fullan 2006) that asserts that educators positioned at the intersection of policy and practice can have a critical impact on K–12 students' experiences and outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al. 2017; Honig 2010; Lipsky 2010). Teachers, administrators and school district personnel develop deep knowledge of the systems in which they work as well as the students and colleagues with whom they work. They understand the strengths and weaknesses of multiple levels of these systems, including at the district, school, class and individual student levels. As expert knowers of their contexts, educators can identify challenges that impair student devel-opment. Educators regularly make decisions about which issues to address and how to address them.

Practitioner scholarship provides a methodological approach for educators to select, define, study, address and evaluate problems and solutions in their schools and districts.

We have previously defined practitioner scholars as:

> Professionals who bring theoretical, pedagogical, and research expertise to bear on identifying, framing, and studying problems of practice and leading informed change in their schools and districts to continually improve learning conditions for students and adults who work within their local contexts. (Adams et al. 2014, 366)

Educators acting as practitioner scholars examine dilemmas in their practice by deciding how their own actions can make an impact rather than viewing these dilemmas as beyond their control. They then engage existing educational theories and research to choose an appropriate approach to address the dilemma. They craft a plan for implementing this approach and include formative assessments that provide information about how effectively the approach is addressing the dilemma; this plan can then guide adjustments and further assessments (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009; Dana and Yendol-Hoppey 2014).

Practitioner scholars, driven by their experiences in their job contexts, conduct scholarship with a focus on positively impacting those contexts. We contrast practitioner scholarship with professional scholarship conducted by a researcher who conducts scholarship as her job rather than for her job (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1999; Richardson 1994). For a professional scholar, the scholarship is a product in and of itself and the professional scholar is often evaluated based on that product, whereas for a practitioner scholar, the scholarship is a tool for educational improvement and the practitioner scholar is evaluated based on that improvement. The practitioner scholar has a vested interest in the impact of the scholarship on a particular issue that exists in her practice (Lytle and Cochran-Smith 1992). The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (2017) calls such issues 'problems of practice', defined as 'a persistent, contextualized, and specific issue embedded in the work of a professional practitioner, the addressing of which has the potential to result in improved understanding, experience, and outcomes.'

As educators gain facility with practitioner scholarship, they begin to take an 'inquiry stance' (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1999), defined as an inquiry stance as a metaphor 'intended to capture the ways we stand, the ways we see, and the lenses we see through' (288). They go on to explain:

> Teaching is a complex activity that occurs within webs of social, historical, cultural, and political significance. Across the life span, an inquiry stance provides a kind of grounding within the changing cultures of school reform and competing political agendas. (288–289)

Practitioner scholars engage an inquiry stance by applying research skills to problems of practice in ways that adapt to changing contexts but also pursue cycles of continuous improvement.

Goals of practitioner scholarship

We name the goal of practitioner scholarship as continuous improvement of teaching and learning in a local context. We leave space in the definition of 'improvement' for the practitioner scholar to articulate specific goals that account for student needs, individual values as well as those shared by immediate colleagues, and institutional culture and/or priorities. However, as faculty members we promote an enactment of practitioner scholarship that reduces educational inequities across sociodemographic groups and advocates an educational system that develops critical thought, values and addresses a holistic view of child and youth development and empowers the marginalised. We draw upon Freire's (1970) *conscientização* to conceptualise the ideal process and content of inquiry. *Conscientização* describes the cultivation of one's awareness and understanding of sociopolitical forces that cause and perpetuate stratification and the hegemonic dominance of one group over others (ibid). Social justice-oriented educators help students build on these insights, or their ability to 'read the world' (Freire and Macedo 1987), to act against oppressive social structures within and outside of school (Stanton-Salazar 2001).

This kind of pedagogy, a critical pedagogy, and practitioner scholarship both position educators as agents of change (Apple 2013; Freire 1998; Shor 1992). Stanton-Salazar (2011) calls educators 'institutional agents' (1066) who have the power either to provide or to withhold the necessary skills, cultural knowledge and access to social networks that empower students to lead lives that challenge social oppression and marginalisation. In her definition of culturally relevant pedagogy, Ladson-Billings (1995) names this raising of students' consciousness of oppression and marginalisation as one of three critical components of liberatory education. The other two are the

maintenance of students' cultural assets and students' academic mastery and success. Since practitioner scholars exist in contexts often focused on the improvement of standardised learning outcomes, Ladson-Billings' tenet regarding academic mastery particularly lends itself to the focus of inquiry. We aim to develop practitioner scholars who take a sociological view regarding the material consequences of stratification that occurs due to marginalisation based on racial, class, gender and other sociodemographic differences. These practitioner scholars understand that students must master curricular content and be able to demonstrate that mastery in particular ways in order to pursue self-actualisation within the educational system.

Impacts of practitioner scholarship

Practitioner scholarship impacts both educator and student learning (Dana and Currin 2017; Nichols and Cormack 2017). When educators conduct practitioner scholarship, they reflect more deeply on their identities as educators (Levin and Rock 2003; Rock and Levin 2002) and shift their beliefs about instruction (Dawson and Dana 2007; Hagevik, Aydeniz, and Rowell 2012; Levin and Rock 2003; Rock and Levin 2002). Practitioner scholarship can also facilitate an increase in teachers' knowledge and understanding of students (Butler and Schnellert 2012; Dresser 2007; Levin and Rock 2003; Rinke and Stebick 2013; Rock and Levin 2002; Wallace 2013), promote growth and change in teaching practice (Dresser 2007; Ermeling 2010; Levin and Rock 2003; Rock and Levin 2002), increase data literacy (Athanases, Wahleithner, and Bennett 2012) and foster attention on social justice and diversity issues (Athanases, Wahleithner, and Bennett 2012; Hyland and Noffke 2005; Martin 2005). These shifts in educators' practices lead to improved student experiences and educational outcomes (Esposito and Smith 2006; Knight, Wiseman, and Cooner 2000).

Practitioner scholarship belongs to the set of dispositions and skills that the world's most successful educational systems incorporate into pre- and in-service teacher education (Darling-Hammond et al. 2017). Darling-Hammond et al. conducted an international study of school systems, composed of heterogeneous student populations, that demonstrate high student achievement on complex thinking and skill sets while reducing inequities across sociodemographic student groups. The researchers identified teacher inquiry as a key component of teacher training in regions of Australia, Singapore and Finland. In these systems, universities and schools collaborated to promote ongoing educational improvement and bottom-up systemic change through systematic study of teaching practices in schools. The teacher candidates and practising teachers developed the tools to continue to engage in self-study and inquiry beyond the completion of particular investigations. These skills particularly enabled teachers to identify successful practices for students belonging to minoritised groups in those countries, potentially highlighting the role that practitioner scholarship can play in addressing education's biggest challenges in systems across the Global North and Australasia. Although Darling-Hammond et al.'s study examined teacher preparation at the bachelor's and Master's levels, practitioner scholarship also holds promise for professional practice doctoral programmes.

Practitioner scholarship and doctoral education

Doctoral programmes in education have historically granted both Ed.D. and PhD degrees (see Anderson 1983; Kennedy, Altman, and Pizano 2018). Although the distinction between the two degrees has not been consistently clear, Shulman et al. (2006) referred to the Ed.D. as a professional practice doctorate meant to prepare practitioners to stay in their local contexts and improve education there rather than leaving to conduct university-based research after graduation. In 2007, the CPED initiative became a formalised network among Ed.D. granting institutions interested in using practitioner scholarship as the methodological foundation for their education doctorates (CPED 2017). The CPED consortium currently consists of over 80 member institutions

from the United States, Canada and New Zealand (ibid). Doctoral programmes based on similar principles also exist across the United Kingdom and Australia (Brown and Cooke 2010; Lester 2004).

Scholarship examining doctoral education and dissertations generated in these programmes has documented powerful uses of practitioner scholarship in coursework and dissertations (for examples, see Belzer and Ryan 2013; Hochbein and Perry 2013; Ma et al. 2018; Ravitch and Lytle 2016). In this research study, we contribute to this body of literature by investigating how graduates enact practitioner scholarship in school and district contexts beyond their university training in order to: (1) understand how the tools of practitioner scholarship are applied; (2) learn how their development can best be supported; and (3) extend our knowledge of how practitioner scholarship leads to continuous educational improvement. We examine graduates' descriptions of their problems of practice in their local contexts after graduation, asking not only whether they systematically examine their practice but also how they do so and how they conceptualise their actions and their ultimate goals.

Methods

In this study, faculty members who ran a six-year-old online Ed.D. programme in Curriculum and Instruction at a research-intensive university in the southern United States relied upon a constructivist research paradigm (Crotty 1998) to conduct a semi-structured interview study. Eleven out of a possible 26 total graduates across two programme cohorts agreed to participate in an interview. Participants included eight women and three men, all of whom identified as White, with job titles that included classroom teacher (*n* = 1), school-based out-of-classroom personnel (*n* = 2), school administrator (*n* = 4), district administrator (*n* = 2), higher education faculty (*n* = 1) and consultant (*n* = 1) (see Table 1). The faculty member who had served as the dissertation advisor of the interview participant conducted the interview by phone. Each interview lasted from 40 to 90 minutes and was transcribed verbatim.

We began data analysis by reviewing the important components of our theoretical framework, which defined practitioner scholarship as including systematic study and improvement of context-based dilemmas related to social justice. Next, using Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) procedures for data analysis, we read all transcripts in their entirety and created research memos identifying potential codes, including in our focus the concepts described in our theoretical framework but not limiting our codes to them. The team then reached consensus on an initial code book, which was then used to code the same transcript. The team discussed discrepancies in coding and modified the code book to better fit the data, consolidating the original 16 codes to 10, which included the following example codes: Changes in Practice, Changes in Thinking, Problems of Practice and Uses of Data. The team then coded the remaining interviews and used HyperRESEARCH software to generate code reports that were used to develop themes. A member of the research team who had

Table 1. Participants.

Participant	Race	Approx. age	Job title	Job context
Christopher	White	45	Elementary school principal	School
Dena	White	40	Multi-tiered systems of support coach	School, out-of-classroom personnel
Jamie	White	45	University instructor	Pre-service teacher education, tertiary
Jane	White	35	Professional development coordinator	District
Jenny	White	35	Assistant principal	Online school
Katie	White	40	International project director	Consultant, Abu Dhabi Education Council
Max	White	40	Middle school teacher	Classroom
Sam	White	35	Middle school gifted coordinator	School, out-of-classroom personnel
Shayna	White	45	Elementary school principal	School
Sheila	White	38	Instructional supervisor of professional development	District
Tina	White	50	Principal	School

not conducted the original interview read each participant interview and compared the raw data to the synthesised findings, looking for counter examples and rival explanations (Yin 2014). An anonymised, revised draft of the findings was then sent back to participants for member checking. The uses of member checking, peer debriefing, analyst triangulation, thick description and looking for rival explanations increased the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Morse 2018; Stake 1995; Yin 2014). While this research methodology does not support the use of post-positivist standards for validity and reliability, readers may engage in naturalistic generalisations to determine the transferability of the findings to their contexts (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Morse 2018; Stake 1995).

Findings

Through the Ed.D. programme, graduates developed knowledge and dispositions that allowed them to identify, frame and act upon problems of practice. In this section, we first describe the dispositions and skills that made this action possible. Specifically, we explore how graduates developed a proactive and social justice-oriented stance that motivated them to act, and the skills they developed with regard to using scholarly literature and data in the course of taking action. We then present one portrait of practitioner scholarship in which the graduate described in her own words how she acted on a problem of practice in her local context after leaving the programme. At the conclusion of the portrait, we analyse the roles of a social justice-oriented stance as well as the uses of literature and data evident in the portrait. In the final sections, we discuss the supports needed to develop and maintain practitioner scholarship beyond graduation.

Graduates developed a proactive, social justice stance toward context-based dilemmas

As a result of having participated in the programme, seven graduates described taking more proactive stances toward context-based dilemmas. They took action regarding the improvement of teaching and learning through their roles in their contexts. Dena attributed her desire to take action to the 'problem-solving mindset' she had honed in the programme. For those who served in leadership positions, this stance also informed the messages they sent to other staff members. For example, as an elementary school principal, Christopher described his role in leading his staff in continual improvement:

> In the Ed.D. program, there was an ongoing saying that we're practitioner scholars and also leaders in our field … I've taken more of an assertive stance … [and] a 'no excuses' approach, letting the teachers know that we're professionals, that while our challenges can be great, it's incumbent on us to find solutions…

The development of a disposition of action that drove change efforts resulted from graduates' increased awareness and knowledge.

While graduates described gaining a range of new skills in the programme, they most frequently named the knowledge regarding educational inequity, marginalisation and White privilege as motivating their persistent efforts to address problems of practice. They described particularly meaningful coursework as that which helped them to understand the historical roots of current gaps in desired outcomes among different sociodemographic groups. As Sam stated,

> [One of the books we read] talks a lot about ideas related to race and privilege … [We read it for a course that took a] historical look at school and schooling and why things are the way they are.

Increased knowledge of historical foundations of education helped graduates identify current policies and practices in their contexts that continued to systematically disadvantage certain groups of students. As a result of increasing their awareness and understanding of educational

inequities, graduates took into account broader questions about the purpose of education, including noticing which student groups are served and which are underserved by the system. Max summarised this perspective:

> What is the goal of school? What are we trying to accomplish here? [My work includes] engaging in conversation [about] that and making sense of that in a system that wasn't designed to meet the needs of everybody. That's a big problem of practice.

Max's increased awareness of institutional inequities motivated his conversations with colleagues about how to address dilemmas of teaching and learning.

These insights about the marginalisation of particular sociodemographic groups in graduates' local contexts helped them frame and address problems of practice in new ways. For example, rather than viewing low student test scores or high suspension rates as results of poor individual performance, graduates began to view gaps in outcomes between student groups as results of institutional policies and practices rooted in a public school system historically designed to meet the needs of students from groups that already had power and privilege. Jamie gave an example of how her increased understanding of marginalisation helped her to identify dilemmas in her context:

> I became aware of those institutional structures that were … marginalising students … Like, for example, in my last context … I saw some of the deepest levels of marginalisation because they had such low expectations for these students [with disabilities] … what I learned allowed me to critically consider what was going on there at a much deeper level.

In this example, Jamie described her new ability to critically analyse how educators' desires to demonstrate care for students by lowering expectations for their performance perpetuated students' exclusion from mainstream classrooms. Educators' low expectations assured that the students would not master skills that could lead to their inclusion and increase access to the educational experiences accessible to their typically developing peers. Jamie continued, 'I'm no longer an oblivious practitioner.' A deepened understanding of the gravity of some social injustices perpetuated in schools motivated graduates to put their proactive stance in motion. They described taking an increasingly asset-based perspective regarding the struggling learners in their schools and became unwilling to accept the status quo without challenging it. Additional knowledge and skills gained in the programme empowered graduates to take action.

Graduates' increased knowledge and skills shaped the enactment of a proactive stance

Graduates identified knowledge and skills learned throughout the Ed.D. programme that informed how they enacted practitioner scholarship. Their descriptions of literature and data use particularly highlighted how their actions as practitioner scholars evolved. Throughout the programme, graduates developed a critical stance toward published scholarly articles. Christopher explained:

> Understanding how to use the literature in education really has impacted me … I feel like a new lens was created…one where you don't always accept what's given to you … you started to realise that there are … biases, that there are different perspectives. As a practitioner scholar we need to be able to read critically and understand that the information that's put in front of us may not always be correct.

Graduates learned how to evaluate the quality of professional literature and judge the relevance of sources. Their abilities to conduct independent literature searches, synthesise findings and determine implications for their contexts increased their confidence and motivation to take action. Six graduates specifically asserted that their knowledge helped them substantiate their positions more effectively and even empowered them to make decisions that differed from those promoted by higher levels of administration. Tina stated:

I try to read and stay current with the research and I try to make decisions based on my knowledge and my team's knowledge versus what's being handed down to us. Before my doctorate I never would have said, 'I'm not doing this' – what the district sent down … now I do it ninety per cent of the time: 'We're not doing this. If we want to be average, we can use it but we're not doing it. We're coming up with our own way of teaching this thing' … I challenge more.

Tina's example highlights how the graduates' knowledge, confidence and proactive dispositions motivated acts of practitioner scholarship that responded to local needs in courageous ways. Graduates' increased knowledge of both quantitative and qualitative data informed their ongoing actions.

From their research methods coursework and their work on their dissertations, the graduates described having developed better skills that allowed them to take deeper and more systematic looks at the dilemmas in their contexts and to have confidence in their practitioner scholarship. Three graduates mentioned an increased comfort with, or use of, quantitative data in their work as a result of the programme, specifically with a focus on looking at school discipline office referrals as well as disaggregated subgroup performance on assessments. Four others described an increased value and use of qualitative data in understanding and acting on problems of practice. Sheila expressed how her increased skills in qualitative data analysis allowed her to understand, act on and have confidence in her conclusions regarding her problem of practice: increasing and measuring the quality of her district's instructional coaches. She stated:

We get a lot of qualitative responses in terms of feedback even in surveys … we're constantly coding and looking for … the common threads and trends … it's very similar to [the] processes that I learned in the qualitative research [class] and the applications that I did in my dissertation.

The development of graduates' proactive stance toward issues of educational injustice, guided by their increased confidence and skills regarding literature and data use, led them to identify, act upon and improve problems of practice. In the next section, we provide one portrait of a graduate enacting practitioner scholarship in their context after graduation. This portrait reflects what practitioner scholarship looked like for the participant and how she applied her learning to making change.

A sample portrait of practitioner scholarship

Graduates identified many challenges in their contexts that they viewed as appropriate dilemmas for them to address (see Table 2). Table 2 lists the problems of practice identified by participants during our interviews. Each check mark represents one participant who mentioned that dilemma. Here, we give one sample portrait in which we synthesise the practitioner scholar's own words to describe the problem of practice. At the conclusion of the portrait, we briefly analyse its demonstration of practitioner scholarship.

A principal focuses on increasing student engagement: Shayna

Shayna was an elementary school principal in a school with a high percentage of racially minoritised students living in poverty. She described how her increased focus on the performance of these students led to a careful examination of various indicators of school engagement and learning. She collected data that showed that some fifth-grade students participated in few activities that could motivate their learning. After sharing these data with the teachers, Shayna created an intervention and then systematically studied its effects.

In Shayna's words:

One of the things that I've done most recently was I pulled up every piece of data I had on every child in the school up through December … then [this is] the impactful piece. What I did is I printed these into massive poster-sized documents and then I took these dots, like [small, coloured sticker] dots and I created

Table 2. Problems of practice identified by participants.

Student achievement	Closing the achievement gap ✓
	Low formative assessment results ✓
	Poor summative test score data ✓
Meeting the needs of all learners	Behaviour of one student ✓
	Working with racially diverse students and/or those living in poverty ✓✓✓✓
	Equity in school discipline ✓
	Student engagement in school ✓
	Meeting the needs of atypical learners ✓
	Meeting the needs of middle school students ✓✓
	Culturally-responsive teaching ✓✓✓
Meeting the needs of teachers	Adjusting to changes in assignment ✓✓ ✓
	Providing effective professional development ✓✓✓✓
	Supporting pre-service teachers ✓
	Retaining teachers ✓
Improving instructional practices	Improved lesson planning ✓
	Conducting effective running records ✓
	Improving student communication/collaboration ✓
	Implementing restorative practices ✓✓✓✓
School-wide improvement	Implementing initiatives building-wide ✓✓
	Improving a school with a low grade ✓✓
	Coordinating pull-out/push-in co-teaching ✓✓
	Working with support personnel ✓
	Choosing appropriate curricular and instructional resources ✓✓
	Communicating and collaborating with parents ✓✓
	Choosing appropriate interventions for the context ✓✓
	Negotiating conflicts between faculty members from different cultural backgrounds ✓
System-wide improvement	Effectively using instructional coaches ✓

a colour coding system and I put a dot by every kid's name for every single interaction that child has at this school besides their daily learning. So … if they have a mentor there's a different dot there … If they're in an after-school club there's a certain colour dot there … So I see that [a certain student] has six dots by his name so … he's very well connected to the school but then the child above him has no dots by her name. This girl is in class, but beyond that she's kind of being overlooked. It's not that every kid has to be in everything, but in my opinion, if I've got students who have no other significant adult or connection to the school, this child is at risk to me especially in a high poverty school. So I … had every team of teachers come in … and I went through their grade level chart and every child on that chart. This was so shocking to them.

…I was also working on a 'bridging the gap' plan for our school. We have a significant achievement gap between our overall population and our African American students and between our overall population and our Hispanic students … so it's a problem and it's significant in reading and maths with both of those subgroups. Teachers need to know this because then they need to examine their practice … so what I did is I pulled all those teachers and then reviewed it. There were 12 African American students in fifth grade that had no dots by their name. So I said, 'What's this about? … [What] is the issue with these kids, and what do we need to do about it?'

As an example, one of the things we did is we took all 12 of those kids and we put them in what we call a computer coding club. So right now … teaching kids to code, is a huge national issue. So we decided, what if we taught those 12 kids to code and suddenly their knowledge level is elevated beyond their peers and now they're becoming tech experts? Can we significantly change their personal agency…? These are kids that are just quietly sitting there in class. So my [staff members] have been meeting with them twice a week [for] almost two months now. These kids are on fire and their knowledge level has skyrocketed.

My intent with the data is to look at these students specifically, and the data that I collect on them from now through the end of the year, what do I see regarding their growth? If it's nothing, fine. I can visibly see them excited about learning. But my expectation is I'm going to see a spike in their achievement data … a couple of them were already kind of high performance but a lot of them were midlevel performers, maybe level two [out of five] on [the state standardised test], maybe level three – not getting service because they weren't struggling and they're not completely at the top … So [this is] just as an example of one way that I'm doing my own … inquiry with this group of kids to see if we can make a difference. But it started with this massive data collection and drilling down child to child to see where we are.

How Shayna's problem of practice reflects practitioner scholarship

Shayna described her use of data to give her a snapshot of student achievement and student engagement at her school. She identified the under-engagement of students with no connection to school as a data-informed problem of practice, which she also framed in the context of race-based achievement gaps at her school. Her focus on marginalisation and equity motivated her to ask questions of her data that addressed these issues and her identification and implementation of an intervention targeted the narrowing of this achievement gap. She described an ongoing use of data, including her observations of the students' enjoyment of the coding club as well as quantitative data regarding their performance on formative and summative assessments, to monitor the effectiveness of the coding club as an intervention. Although she did not discuss the role that professional literature played in guiding her actions regarding this problem of practice, she demonstrated an awareness of relevant topics in the field, in this case teaching kids to code, and applied that knowledge in her practitioner scholarship.

Learning from portraits of practitioner scholarship

This sample portrait illustrates an enactment of practitioner scholarship after the Ed.D. programme similar to those that we heard across participants. In this sample portrait, the graduate identified a problem of practice that affected a marginalised student group. She synthesised her tacit knowledge based on experience, knowledge of trustworthy scholarly sources and context-based data to frame the problem and decide upon an intervention. She also worked interdependently with other educators to collaboratively address this problem of practice. The Ed.D. programme facilitated the development of these skills and dispositions in strategic ways.

Supports that scaffolded the development and enactment of practitioner scholarship

Graduates mentioned specific factors within the doctoral programme that helped them develop their dispositions and skills as practitioner scholars. They also mentioned supports in their contexts that enabled them to conduct this work. Programme components frequently mentioned across participants included a thematic focus on social justice, a student cohort model, practice-embedded coursework, a focus on the critical consumption of literature and a focus on data. Components that existed in graduates' contexts that enabled their successful enactment of practitioner scholarship included the freedom to implement new ideas, time to work collaboratively to conduct inquiry and share findings, and sufficient data tools and other resources to engage in the work.

Coursework focused on social justice

As mentioned above, graduates' deepened understanding of issues of student marginalisation honed their framing of problems of practice. Themes related to social justice were carried through multiple courses and assignments in the programme. Students specifically linked their courses related to critical pedagogy, high poverty schools and the history of education to building their awareness of, and commitment to, these topics. Shayna gave this example:

> In the poverty class, with the idea of hidden practices in the classroom – from tone of voice with students and the way we may interact with students that is less visible or less known – I don't think that I had ever given a lot of thought to those practices that are less visible … that element significantly changed my thinking and practice and how I talk to teachers.

Students learned how to apply these concepts to practice through coursework in practitioner inquiry and professional development. Their placement in a cohort that stayed together throughout their coursework provided exposure to a diversity of ideas in a nurturing context, which further facilitated their growth and learning.

The cohort model

Graduates participated in courses with a consistent group of approximately 20 students. They valued a range of properties about this model, from its homogeneity to its heterogeneity in students' geographical locations, ethnic backgrounds and job titles. For instance, some students from the same districts or schools began the programme together and used their shared context as an important reference and laboratory for their learning. Tina explained:

> I went through [the programme] with four principals and we kind of stuck together, and not only the principals but the other teachers and district people. It was very supportive in that way.

However, the geographic diversity of other members of the cohort was also appreciated. Jenny expressed:

> [Hearing from] members of the cohort, from their districts, how they understood certain policies or procedures or processes or teaching practices, and how it's viewed in their district, it was like, 'Okay, so there's multiple interpretations and there's multiple perspectives.'

Other students relied upon the racial diversity of the cohort to develop their understanding, particularly of White privilege. Dena described an experience at a face-to-face workshop with her cohort where they addressed this topic:

> Having real conversations face-to-face with our cohorts and talking about race, talking about privilege … having those conversations about race with a Black person, and I'm a White person … was very uncomfortable initially. So, that was a huge 'ah-ha' for me. I've experienced it and now I always have that in my toolbox when I am asking teachers to have those conversations or think about their students of colour or [those] from poverty, in a different light.

Dena and others also relied on having cohort members from other job positions to broaden their perspectives. Dena continued:

> [I have developed an] understanding of administration and the role that the administrators play and I'm thankful that I am able to still maintain a teacher leadership role and not an administrative role, but I do have a better understanding of an administrator's role.

This understanding of multiple perspectives within a consistent group of colleagues nurtured risk-taking that helped students define their roles and understand their power as practitioner scholars. The balance within the cohort between homogeneity and heterogeneity played a key role in what made the cohort experience powerful. Interacting with a cohort also strengthened the values students placed on collaboration as well as the skills they had for doing so, as reflected in their descriptions of addressing problems of practice above.

Practice-embedded coursework with a focus on critical and effective uses of scholarly literature and data

Graduates particularly mentioned the importance of the programme's approach to keeping course-work, assignments and the capstone experience focused on their local contexts. Effective classes were those that were particularly modified for doctoral students who desired to remain as practitioners after the completion of the degree. Max stated:

> The designers of the programme thought about how do we connect practitioners with advanced degree work … I didn't want to leave the classroom and I wanted to be able to research within a classroom and the idea of practitioner inquiry [in the practitioner inquiry course] was exactly what I was looking for.

Having the dissertation experience focus closely on an issue in their local context that particularly intrigued them helped students synthesise, apply and extend the learning from their coursework to a task that greatly mattered to them. Katie expressed her acute focus on the context-based dilemma that motivated her to begin and complete the degree:

> I had this topic in my mind … much earlier than when I even thought about doing a doctorate because [the] conflict between Western teachers [in schools here in the Middle East] … has always been a topic that interested me a lot.

The capstone experience, or dissertation, also required students to apply the knowledge they gained with regard to reading research literature and collecting and using data, as described above. The work students completed for their dissertations shaped their identification and framing of, and strategies regarding, the problems of practice they addressed as graduates.

Schools' and districts' support of practitioner scholarship

While graduates described the doctoral programme as having prepared them to engage in change efforts in their local contexts after the completion of the programme, they also required certain supports in those contexts to successfully undertake this work. They identified the importance of collaborative school cultures, the freedom to implement new ideas and access to appropriate data tools as being vital to their success. Max stated:

> What do we know about learners in middle grades and [how it] relates to social emotional development and support? … [The] model of professional learning here [at my school] is teacher-led inquiry and so last year and this year, I engaged the inquiry work around that. As part of that, I really looked closely at what does literature say about these particular areas.

The congruence between the model of learning in Max's school and the model of learning in the doctoral programme facilitated his application of the skills he had learned in the programme.

Discussion

Findings from this study demonstrate that programme graduates continued to use the tools of practitioner scholarship in their local contexts beyond graduation. In particular, they maintained a focus on social justice as they identified and addressed problems of practice and they adapted their uses of the tools they had gained in the programme to meet the challenges and respond to the limitations of their contexts.

Identifying, framing and studying problems of practice: the challenges of institutional agency

Programme graduates maintained a critical stance toward educational injustices faced by marginalised students. During the programme, they grew in their understanding of the historical and contemporary institutional structures that systematically disadvantaged students from non-majority groups. In conjunction with the development of stance toward action and increases in their confidence and skills, this understanding of institutionalised marginalisation led them to challenge these structures, which included saying 'no' to higher-level administrators when asked to do things that did not benefit all students as well as advocating for particular students arguably to the exclusion of others. In making these decisions and taking these actions, graduates enacted institutional agency as critically conscious educators. They grappled with how to have conversations with colleagues about student marginalisation and their stance and actions may have put them at odds with those above them in the educational hierarchy who could shape their career trajectories.

Successfully enacting critically conscious practitioner scholarship requires acumen to determine when and how to change policies and practices that harm some students but also benefit others. Graduates applied this acumen in collaboration with stakeholders and colleagues. These collaborations can help protect individual practitioner scholars as well as help to maintain the integrity of change efforts that could revert to practices that reinforce the status quo and perpetuate marginalisation. As Alma Flor Ada stated, 'Teaching is never neutral' (2003, 5). Practitioner scholarship

gives educators tools to develop, maintain and apply a critical stance to defining and acting upon problems of practice that might have previously seemed neutral even though they lead to the educational failure of minoritised student groups.

Leading informed change to continually improve learning conditions: functional adaptations of practitioner scholarship

Graduates' applications of practitioner scholarship involved responding to context-based challenges that led them to modify and adapt the tools gained in the programme. They discussed challenges such as the lack of access to peer-reviewed research articles, not being able to collect sufficient data, facing punitive administrative cultures and not having adequate time. When faced with each challenge, the individual practitioner scholar had to navigate the situation using existing resources. Navigating the reality of daily life in schools and districts meant that graduates relied upon their knowledge, skills and dispositions to enact practitioner scholarship rather than clinging tightly to a particular programme, set of steps or requirements. In their post-graduation practitioner scholarship, graduates skilfully balanced flexible responsiveness with a steadfast commitment to educational justice. Enactment of successful practitioner scholarship once university support was no longer available required a wisdom of application that enabled liberatory leadership (Giroux 1992).

Implications

The findings of this study have implications for: faculty members designing and implementing programmes focused on practitioner scholarship; other higher education personnel desiring to support those programmes; school district-level personnel who hope to leverage the power of practitioner scholarship to make bottom-up improvements in local educational contexts; and researchers who want to broaden and deepen our understanding of the nature and effectiveness of practitioner scholarship in addressing student marginalisation and improving educational outcomes.

Higher education

Findings from this study demonstrate the potential power of practitioner scholarship for improving educator practice and school quality, particularly for underserved and/or historically marginalised students. Practitioner scholarship in the form of teacher inquiry can guide the development of higher education programmes regarding both pre-service and in-service teacher education at the bachelor's, Master's and doctoral levels (Darling-Hammond et al. 2017; Ross et al. 2011). At the doctoral level, distinct degrees or programmes should develop practitioner scholarship as distinct from (but equally rigorous and respected as) traditional PhD research.

Findings from this study support existing research that demonstrates the impact of cohort models, strategic alignment of curriculum and assignments across courses, and a focus on social justice as critical to the success of these efforts (CPED 2017; Ravitch and Lytle 2016). Support of university personnel and faculty colleagues for doctoral programmes focused on practitioner scholarship is also a necessary component of success. Doctoral education in practice-based fields rests upon contested understandings about what counts as good research as well as the role of research in society (Archbald 2008; Kennedy, Altman, and Pizano 2018). University and department leaders play a critical role in establishing and supporting practitioner scholarship-focused doctoral programmes through providing appropriate faculty professional development, facilitating effective and supportive administrative processes regarding dissertation completion and submission, and providing logistical support to programmes to maintain core features such as a cohort model.

Schools and districts

Graduates described both the importance of the diversity of cohort members as well as the power of having fellow colleagues from their schools and districts participate in their cohort. While the effectiveness of providing practitioner scholar-focused doctoral education for district cohorts requires further study, findings from this limited sample suggest that schools and districts might benefit from promoting simultaneous pursuit of graduate degrees among colleagues that share local contexts. Graduates also described the power of the obstacles they encountered in their schools and districts when trying to engage in practitioner scholarship. Supporting practitioner scholars with time, financial resources, data and software tools, the freedom to try new things in their contexts and an outlet to share their findings were mentioned as necessary for the success of these graduates to maximise the impact of the learning accomplished in their doctoral programme.

Scholars and researchers

Practitioner scholars and university-based researchers should continue to study the implementation and impact of programmes that facilitate the development of practitioner scholarship as well as the implementation of practitioner scholarship itself. Graduates described addressing problems of practice that targeted marginalised students, and research documenting the impacts of those efforts could offer insights regarding the improvement of educational settings for these student groups. Future research could also further explore the factors necessary in both university and school district contexts to provide effective graduate education for educators who wish to stay in the field. Limitations from this study also suggest directions for future research.

Limitations

Although issues of student marginalisation played a central role in the Ed.D. programme under study, as well as in the analysis of findings, this study was conducted by a research team composed of four White faculty members and one Chinese PhD student. The sample consisted of slightly over half the number of students who had graduated from the programme at the time data collection began, and all of these participants were White. The lack of diversity among researchers and participants is a limitation that could be addressed in future research. Additionally, the small sample and pool of potential participants as well as the bounding of the data to one graduate programme require cautious applications of study findings and further research regarding the transferability of findings across contexts.

Conclusion

The role of university-based doctoral programmes that focus on and facilitate the development of the skills of practitioner scholarship show promise in transforming educational contexts, particularly for historically underserved student populations. As schools in the Global North and Australasia face challenges regarding diversity, pluralism and the underserving of students from non-majority sociodemographic groups, the tools, skills and dispositions of practitioner scholarship can empower educators to enact and systematically study the effects of context-based improvements. Educators greatly impact the educational trajectories of refugees, disaffected students, students with disabilities and other minoritised students just as they shape the educational growth of typically developing students from the majority group. Developing educators as practitioner scholars could maximise their potential as institutional agents enacting social justice.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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