

EdD-Activism Through the Dissertation in Practice and Beyond: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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ABSTRACT

This special issue celebrates our colleagues, graduates, and current students for being, becoming, and supporting EdD-activists. Grounded in the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate framework, our program has long emphasized advocating for equity and social justice, yet we recently went a step further by framing students' action research dissertations as opportunities for activism. Stemming from these ongoing efforts, this issue may nourish comparable transformation in other schools and communities. This introduction outlines our aim to introduce and illustrate the concept of EdD-activism, aided by a range of student, graduate, and faculty voices. By highlighting students' and graduates' experiences and achievements as EdD-activists and describing the structures and approaches that give rise to EdD-activism, we hope to inspire other educators to see and act upon the activist potential in their own practice, as well as encouraging fellow teacher educators to instill or enhance that mindset in the students they serve.

KEYWORDS

activism, action research, dissertation in practice

The Doctor of Education (EdD) in Educational Practice and Innovation is an online degree program at the University of South Carolina (USC) not just to keep pace with technology trends. Rather, the largely asynchronous format allows us to serve full-time educators around the globe who are committed to the challenge of continuing *their* education while remaining grounded in their day-to-day work. As experienced institutional members of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED, 2022c), “We envision a future where equity-minded educational professionals lead lasting and positive change for the learning and benefit of everyone” (para. 2). Our concentration, with a focus on Curriculum Studies, has enrolled hundreds of practitioners in rural, urban, and suburban settings from California to the Carolinas, Canada to Connecticut, and as far afield as Guam and China. From preschool teachers to professors, curriculum designers and instructional coaches to corporate trainers, and district administrators, we have taught a wide range of students one course announcement, discussion post, email, or virtual meeting at a time.

With several online EdD programs in existence, including many of our fellow affiliates of CPED (2022b), we often ask students what drew them to USC. In response, we hear the expected answers of the convenient online format and tightly structured 3-year course sequence, coupled with the program's relative affordability, yet Curriculum Studies EdD students are just as likely to cite our avowed commitment to equity and social justice. We take pride in knowing those values shine clearly across cyberspace, striving to attract applicants with the necessary dispositions to uphold them—or a palpable desire to develop such capacities as they progress through

the coursework. Indeed, admission is only one piece of the larger EdD puzzle, and our responsibilities as faculty members extend beyond reviewing applications and facilitating online courses. As Perry (2024) argued, “an EdD program is a constant improvement effort” (p. 105), best undertaken with a shared goal in mind.

Those principles of continuous renewal and backward design recently guided a years-long process of enhancing how we introduce and facilitate the dissertation component of our program, which is known as a dissertation in practice (DiP) in CPED (2022a) parlance to emphasize students' roles as insiders who engage in some form of practitioner inquiry. With our Curriculum Studies colleagues, we specifically sought to sharpen the social justice aspects of students' action research projects—to ensure we were all living up to the ideals that attract three sizable cohorts each year. Heeding Cochran-Smith's (2010) warning that *social justice* is susceptible to being “diluted, trivialized or co-opted” (p. 445), we championed a bolder focus on *activism* throughout the CPED community (Becton et al., 2020).

In 2019, USC hosted the CPED convening with a theme of *Interaction and Activism in the Education Doctorate*. As part of the opening session, we facilitated an organization-wide discussion activity to explore our peers' views on activist profiles, program strategies, and indicators for measuring our success with activating EdD students. From those insights, we developed an emerging framework for EdD-activism (Becton et al., 2020) that laid the foundation for a subsequent framework specific to our program (Currin et al., 2023). In parallel, two of our colleagues served as guest editors for two special issues on activism in this very journal



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(Becton & Jeffries, 2020, 2021). Each of those collections shared related experiences from EdD graduates and faculty at other institutions, such as how Coble et al. (2020) immersed their students in placed-based experiences that shifted their identities toward activism, and Ryan and Watson's (2021) redesign of their EdD program to "cultivate greater activism among [their] graduates to lead systemic change" (p. 12).

Having ignited and kindled CPED-wide conversations about activism, we celebrated as ideas exchanged at the 2019 convening continued to resonate in other EdD-serving institutions (e.g., Storey & Fletcher, 2023). All the while, we continued to explore the implications for our program. Through iterative reflection and conversation, we co-constructed a definition of *EdD-activism*, the concept at the heart of this collection: critical application of advanced knowledge of educational theory, research, and practice to resolve injustices or inequities through collaboration with diverse communities (Currin et al., 2023).

From admission to graduation and beyond, this concept shapes our embedded understanding of the processes of being, becoming, and supporting scholarly practitioners. In turn, this special issue offers real-world depictions of and reflections on EdD-activism from a diverse array of educational contexts, alongside attention to the instructional structures and choices that nurture such a critical stance. We share them as "entry points . . . rather than as exemplars or models" (Porfilio et al., 2019, p. 105), joining and extending similar conversations about EdD programs (e.g., Pape et al., 2023; Perry, 2024), as well as other avenues for preservice and practicing educators' professional learning (e.g., Caro-Bruce et al., 2007; Krebs & Torrez, 2022). As many scholars have argued, being an educator is a complex, context-dependent endeavor, resistant to strict quantification or universal truths (Blakely & Hemphill, 2021). Therefore, instead of issuing one-size-fits-all prescriptions, the contributions in this issue will ideally serve as "catalytic agents" (Carini, 2001, p. 62), sparking transferable insights. Through the DiP and beyond, as the title implies, we aspire for this collection to fuel transformational activism in other schools and communities.

FROM ACTION RESEARCH TO EDD-ACTIVISM

As a professional degree, the EdD charges educators to become stewards of their profession by critiquing current practices, initiating evidence-based changes, and generating knowledge from the ensuing transformation (Shulman et al., 2006). Harnessing the power of *inquiry as stance*, which "redefines leaders as learners and thus blurs the boundaries between leaders and followers, between those framing the problems and those implementing the changes in response" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 123), it endows students with the skills that enable them to address wicked problems in complex systems (Rasmussen, 2018). As Wergin (2011) conceded, when determining program particulars, "local circumstances will always hold sway" (p. 136), yet CPED encourages all EdD programs to align with core principles, including that all EdD graduates should know "one of the most important roles of the expert educator is to disrupt, to challenge, [and] to disorient" (p. 126). Putting that principle into practice begins with critical reflection *on one's practice*.

Of the various means for instilling such skills and dispositions, our program includes multiple courses in action research, a form of practitioner inquiry that encourages cyclical action and reflection (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003). Suitable to educational settings and doctoral-level scholarship (Efron & Ravid, 2020; Herr & Anderson,

2015), action research enables EdD students to understand their practice and its conditions, test solutions, and initiate change (Kemmis, 2009; Putman & Rock, 2018). More accurately, as both the catalyst and conduit for EdD-activism, action research permeates our course sequence to *empower* students as they work on their DiPs across all 3 years.

The geographic expanse of our student population and our students' use of action research in their dissertations keeps us attuned to a dizzying array of complex problems of practice. In recent years, we have witnessed COVID-related school closures that initially affected only a handful of our students in faraway states before the steady crescendo and other pandemic aftershocks ultimately confronted us all (Baker, 2022). We have sympathized with students whose communities faced natural disasters of a different sort, like the deadliest tornado in Kentucky history (Robertson et al., 2021) and the unprecedented flooding caused by Hurricane Helene (Gecker et al., 2024). Having learned to read world news through the lenses of our students, we longed to leap through our laptops in support of those in close proximity to the murder of George Floyd (Richards, 2020), the Hamas attack that enflamed the longstanding Israeli–Palestinian conflict (CBS News, 2023), and the shooting at Apalachee High School (Fortin, 2024), among other tragedies. Closer to home, we have seen the chilling effect of book bans, like the one that brought Ta-Nehisi Coates to a South Carolina school board meeting in stoic support of a teacher who dared to teach his award-winning memoir (Noel, 2023). We have also witnessed the contagious power of such defiance. Indeed, recognizing that education always occurs amid entangled social, historical, and political forces, we know these events and their aftermath transcend geographical borders, demanding the kinds of reflective practitioners we seek to cultivate and emulate.

As the need to encourage more *critical* action research in response to these challenges became especially acute, we conceptualized and implemented EdD-activism to reinvigorate our existing policies and practices. Having described that process in an earlier article (Currin et al., 2023), we focus more on the fruits of our collective labor in this issue, having invited students, graduates, and colleagues to share their unique perspectives and experiences. Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2020) likened going public in this manner to tossing a stone in a pond, illustrating how "inquiry disturbs the status quo of educational practices, creating a ripple effect" (p. 209). The combined voices in this issue, from practicing and aspiring EdD-activists and the professors who support them, can truly make some waves.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE PROGRAM

Bringing EdD-activism to life requires a clear programmatic framework and keen attention to the processes of being, becoming, and supporting scholarly practitioners. To acquaint readers with the instructional scaffolding that gives rise to EdD-activism, this section provides a basic overview of our 3-year program, specifically the Curriculum Studies concentration of USC's EdD in Educational Practice and Innovation. Like all CPED-affiliated programs, we prioritize rigor, relevance, and impact as key components of the professional practice doctorate (Kochhar-Bryant, 2017). We designed our curriculum with a purposeful course sequence that embodies CPED (2022a) principles and combines core courses, dissertation courses, and concentration-specific courses to establish the theoretical and conceptual foundation students need to explore



their problems of practice and envision change strategies and solutions that prioritize equity and social justice while simultaneously drafting their dissertations.

In Year 1, students' core courses focus on diversity and the curriculum to heighten their critical consciousness and reflection, interlaced with research courses dedicated to introducing action research and compatible methodologies to support students as they begin drafting their problems of practice and research design. Toward the end of the first year, students meet with their advisors (i.e., dissertation chairs) to finalize a prospectus that constitutes their qualifying exam. Eventually becoming the first chapter of their dissertations, it presents a clear problem of practice, intervention if applicable, research questions, and an overview of the theoretical framework and research design.

In Year 2, the pattern continues with a course on critical pedagogy, another on organizational change, and more courses on diversity and the curriculum. In this second year, students develop a draft of their literature review in a course dedicated to that purpose and work with their advisors to finalize an action research proposal. Eventually serving as the first three chapters of their dissertation, it constitutes their comprehensive exam.

Year 3 focuses on finalizing the dissertation, as each student implements their proposed study, reports their findings in Chapter 4, and discusses the implications in Chapter 5, which includes a detailed action plan to showcase students' awareness of the cyclical nature of action research. In support of this work, they complete a leadership course, one on education research, and another on diversity training. These final learning experiences encourage students to go public with their inquiries beyond the dissertation, reinforcing the program's overall framework.

In sum, this 3-year sequence reflects our conceptualization of curriculum that nourishes EdD-activism. Modeling the same stance we expect of students, this structure includes iterative rounds of discussions and revisions on our part. Through this process of continuous renewal anchored by a shared vision, we aim to create building blocks that strengthen the critical stance of our students in their educational settings and transform them into scholarly practitioners and change agents armed with professional and theoretical knowledge and skills.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE ISSUE

In four distinct parts, this issue builds on the prior description of how we as teacher educators cultivate EdD-activism, illustrating how our students develop that stance en route to graduation—and crucially, how they maintain their active identities as EdD-activists beyond the bounds of the program. The first contribution expands on the conceptualization of EdD-activism and how it informs program design. Three subsequent articles offer representative examples of EdD-activism in action—distilled versions of three recent action research dissertations from the program, followed by four articles featuring a range of current and former student voices engaged in critical reflection on the process of adopting an EdD-activist stance in doctoral study and the broader journey of becoming and remaining committed to EdD-activism. The co-authored reflections in the final three articles bring the issue to a close by demonstrating the importance of collaboration for sustainable EdD-activism. In short, as the following synopses convey, the contributions to this issue combine the processes and outcomes of action research to highlight

how transformative learning experiences impact our students' and graduates' practices as well as our own.

Part I: Conceptualizing EdD-Activism

In "The Activist Educator: Defining EdD-Activism to Promote Equity and Justice," Suha Tamim and three program graduates—Lorin Koch, Karen Martin, and Russell Clark—describe a participatory action research study they undertook to complement the faculty-developed EdD-activism definition and redesign of selected courses as presented in a prior publication (Currin et al., 2023). Presenting their version of the EdD-activism framework and reflections on the social justice courses they completed in the program, the article highlights the valuable perspectives of these agents of change, voicing their desire to align their study's outcomes with the work of program faculty.

Part II: EdD-Activism in the Dissertation in Practice

Turning to the section of the issue featuring concrete examples of action research conducted by program graduates that embody activism and change, "So the World Isn't Just Old White Guys?: Student and Teacher Experiences in a Culturally Relevant Advanced Placement Chemistry Class" showcases Jason Sox's powerful effort to improve his practice. Realizing his identity as a successful science teacher relied on strict alignment to state and district standards, Jason felt called to address the lack of opportunities for meaningful student engagement in his classroom, striving to reconcile his instructional priorities and those of his students. As he progressed through the doctoral program, Jason's activist stance grew from analyzing past experiences, registering his identity as a White male educator, and envisioning how to incorporate more inclusive curriculum and pedagogy. As the article details, he implemented four new units and captured rich qualitative data, surfacing two unique and important perspectives. First, he shares personal insights, including the challenges associated with planning and executing each unit alongside the benefits in the form of improved relationships with students, improved confidence in teaching culturally relevant lessons, and increased awareness of his cultural biases. Second, he shares the students' experiences to highlight the tangible impact of the modified curriculum.

Continuing the theme of this section, "Increasing ELA Teachers' Confidence Regarding LGBTQ+ Inclusion Through Professional Development" by Nicole Mustaccio offers a succinct overview of her dissertation and the ensuing ripple effect, illustrating how action research empowers doctoral students to start with a problem they can solve where they are and go from there. As an out, queer high school teacher, Nicole wanted to affirm LGBTQ+ students through counter-heteronormative activism. Faced with a problem that felt impossible to solve, Nicole learned to narrow her focus to her sphere of influence: the school's White, cisgender, straight, and heteronormative English language arts (ELA) curriculum. Designing and facilitating professional development sessions for eight ELA colleagues, Nicole sought to increase both their knowledge and comfort. Inspired by the outcomes, Nicole nevertheless wondered whether participants would make the leap from philosophy to action. Bridging from Nicole's dissertation, this article serves as a powerful follow-up by further exploring the ELA educators' confidence with addressing LGBTQ+ inclusion and potential backlash and expanding the scope to include special education ELA teachers. Describing Nicole's additional efforts to help colleagues practice analyzing



literature through a queer perspective and engage in role play with the goal of navigating challenges related to LGBTQ+ inclusion in ELA classrooms, the piece demonstrates how and why to continue engaging in EdD-activism beyond graduation.

Rounding out Part II of the issue is “If Not Me, Then Who?: A Study of Racial and Cultural Competence in a High School English Department” by DiAnna Sox. Like her peers in the preceding articles, DiAnna experienced powerful professional transformation as an EdD student, recognizing that racial and cultural content and discourse were absent from the English classrooms at her school. When she realized her fear at the prospect of implementing a curricular intervention based on what she was learning as an EdD student, she pivoted toward inviting her colleagues to join her in an action research study focused on improving their collective cultural competence, owning their shared responsibility to be change agents. Recounting her exploration of the factors that contribute to racial silence and whether targeted intervention and increased cultural competence could assist in breaking through those barriers, the article shows her effort to lead the transformation of the group’s classrooms into more racially and culturally just spaces.

Part III: Being and Becoming EdD-Activists

Moving to diverse illustrations of the journey to becoming an EdD-activist, this section of the issue begins with Erin Hawley Cronin’s contribution, “Becoming an Education Activist Through the Action Research Dissertation: From Ideas to Action.” As a student teacher at the time of the Columbine shooting and a Minnesota educator whose students lived near the site of George Floyd’s murder, Erin has a longstanding concern for anxious students who need help coping with pain, particularly as related to racial strife or LGBTQ+ oppression. Her desire to do more to affect positive change led her to our doctoral program, and the dissertation process was her catalyst for action. Given the opportunity to investigate scholarship related to youth anxiety, especially for LGBTQ+ and BIPOC students, Erin learned to frame her problems of practice with critical race theory, Queer theory and pedagogy, and culturally sustaining pedagogy. Shifting from worry, concern, and hesitation to action, Erin gained confidence in her ability to thoroughly investigate problems; research, plan, and enact solutions; and pivot as needed. Her article testifies to EdD-activism as a workable, flexible, real-world process—including in her current position as a university academic advisor and instructor.

Likewise, “Cultivating Critical Consciousness: The Journey of Becoming an EdD-Activist” situates Ashley Wright’s EdD experience in her broader professional trajectory. As an undergraduate, she studied political science and history with an interest in community improvement, but the 2016 U.S. presidential election left her feeling disillusioned with her work in politics, as she observed community engagement and civic education in decline, while voter apathy surged. Pursuing a new career as a teacher, she sought to build a classroom experience that fostered civic education, giving students the tools to transform society. As she explains, although she hoped her students would develop their own attitudes and desires toward activism, she never identified as an activist until she enrolled in the EdD program. Our focus on social justice and commitment to EdD-activism helped her embrace being an educator, researcher, and activist all rolled into one. She also speaks to the program’s capacity to bridge the gap between her academic disciplines, nudging her to explore how political science, history, and education combine to

support her activism in her classroom and school community. Ultimately, the article reflects on her continuing journey, aligned with the special issue’s emphasis on sustaining EdD-activism beyond the dissertation.

Next, Christine Pipitone’s contribution, “On Becoming a Community College Professor-Activist,” complements other perspectives in the collection, both because of her professional context outside of K–12 education and because she wrote it as a current student—in her words, “an EdD-activist in training.” Presented in four sections, her article connects her intellectual growth as a doctoral student to her professional transformation from a community college professor to a community college professor-activist. The first section provides an overview of the community college’s mission and the central role of faculty in supporting the academic and social needs of a diverse student population. The second section traces her intellectual journey in the program, from the early coursework that introduced the collaborative and transformative potential of social justice education to the emphasis on self-reflection and positionality throughout the iterative action research design process in Year 2. The third section, conceptualized as “becoming,” discusses the rationale for her dissertation to address faculty burnout, and the final section, conceptualized as “beyond,” outlines her vision for continuing to advocate for improving the college culture for all faculty, staff, and students.

Rounding out the third section, “Past, Present, and Future as a Social Studies Educator Activist” shares Jess Morey’s belief in the power of stories to teach and the accompanying insight that sometimes one must read more to challenge what one thinks one knows. She illustrates these lessons by reflecting on her experience as a current EdD student, specifically her evolving understanding of critical race theory as a culture war weapon. Piercing through dominant media narratives in Year 1 of the program disrupted her assumptions about the solely positive benefits of desegregation and ignited a passion for responding to racial injustice in education. As she describes, these insights led to an action research dissertation centered on her community’s need for teacher education related to personal finance so a state-mandated personal financial education course can have the desired impact of being a tool for equity. The article’s discussion of her course experiences, district and school experiences, and evolving research provides an important testimony of the development of an EdD-activist stance in process.

Part IV: Collaborating to Sustain EdD-Activism

The reflective essays in the final section build on the preceding articles’ attention to the process of action research, its outcomes, and its inherently collaborative nature. As a unique introduction to the section, “A Shared Journey Toward Social Justice Activism” is a co-authored contribution from DiAnna and Jason Sox. A married couple who navigated the EdD program together, the Soxes experienced a profound shift in their individual and collective identities as educators and parents. Their article shares how their professors and fellow cohort members supported them in acquiring not just a degree but a newfound purpose to become EdD-activists.

Next, in another unique contribution, former student Molly Staeheli and her former principal, Jeff Flanigan, tell a story of “EdD-Activism: Two Journeys Converge to Support Long-Term English Learners.” Identifying as a newly emerging EdD-activist teacher and a life-long activist administrator, they share their critical reflection on the culturally irrelevant scripted curriculum for English learners in



their majority-minority district, exacerbated by a lack of teachers with similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds. As they argue, continuing to ignore such systemic issues is akin to betrayal. Indeed, this concern catalyzed Molly's dissertation, and Jeff served as her external committee member. The article illustrates how Molly's doctoral work provided an opportunity to respond to this complex problem of practice, alongside Jeff's effort to enhance the school's mentorship and retention of educators of color. Further, they underscore the necessary courage to move forward in a political and cultural climate that does not welcome activist work. We share that sentiment and encourage readers to join us in advocating for more equitable teaching and learning.

Finally, our colleagues Whitney Roach and Rhonda Jeffries echo the emphasis on collaboration established in the first article with their contribution, "Becoming, Beckoning, and Belonging as Educational Activists." Delving into their nuanced experiences as faculty members—one in a nascent career stage as an assistant professor and the other a seasoned professor—they explore the intricacies of assuming activist roles within the academic domain and serving as inherent role models for the emerging EdD-activists in our program. Treating becoming as an ongoing, fluid process without definitive endpoints, they encourage continual self-reflection, personal growth, and interrogation while underscoring the value of developing educational communities that foster belonging—particularly for those marginalized by race, sexual orientation, or gender identity. In short, their reflections offer insights for teacher educators who seek to support and mentor fellow academics and scholarly practitioners alike. Ultimately, they call for more inclusive and diverse academic environments where all community members actively work to counter injustice.

A CALL TO READERS

Recognizing the myriad problems of practice confronting anyone who identifies as an educator, including those that warrant what Santoro and Cain (2018) referred to as *principled resistance*, this special issue addresses the important question of how to respond—not in the form of a lockstep recipe, but in the messy lived experiences of EdD-activists and their allies. Porfilio et al. (2019) urged EdD programs to “gather the courage to use the term [social justice], explicitly define it, connect it to program facets, and continually evolve” (p. 120). Applying that charge to EdD-activism, we compiled this collection to demonstrate its central role in our work while recognizing such work is always ongoing. Like Krebs and Torrez (2022), we share the voices of our students and graduates in hopes of illustrating “the enduring impact their participation in this program has on their teaching and their lives today” (p. 1). More importantly, like Bradley-Levine (2018), we affirm teacher leadership and activism as interrelated “to move our thinking toward a better understanding of what it means to be a critical teacher leader who through advocacy integrates both teaching and leadership for equity and social justice” (p. 51). Extending these conversations to the doctoral level and beyond K–12 settings, we hope this diverse collection will ultimately inspire other educators to see themselves as activists and act accordingly. Further, we invite our fellow teacher educators to instill or enhance that mindset in the students they serve. As this issue testifies, it truly is a team effort.

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