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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF ATTRITION FROM A DOCTORAL COHORT PROGRAM: CHANGES IN FEELINGS OF AUTONOMY AND RELATEDNESS IN THE DISSERTATION STAGE

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose This study examined why Ed.D students discontinued their doctoral programs

during the dissertation phase as well as how a student's needs of autonomy, relat-

edness, and competence were met during different stages of the program.

Background Time to complete the doctoral degree continues to increase. Between 40-60% of

doctoral students are making the decision to discontinue work toward a degree they have already invested significant amounts of time, money, and energy into

earning.

Methodology This phenomenological study utilized the lens of Self-Determination Theory.

Seven participants (three women and four men) with between nine and sixteen years of post-secondary education, were interviewed three times each to gain a

better understanding of the factors that impacted their attrition.

Contribution Past research has suggested using a cohort model to encourage retention of doc-

toral students. All seven participants were enrolled in cohort programs. This study incorporated suggestions from prior research such as a cohort model of learning and ensuring the students' needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence are met. The study investigates the experience of students in cohort programs who

did not finish their dissertations.

Findings This study found that the doctoral students who did not complete their disserta-

tions experienced changes in feelings of autonomy and relatedness between their coursework and their dissertations. This made it difficult for them to persist through the dissertation stage of the program. Changes in autonomy and relatedness, when coupled with changes in advisors, career, or family responsibilities resulted in students reprioritizing their goals and thus leaving the dissertation in-

complete.

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Recommendations Evaluate students' autonomy needs as they progress through the program and for Institutions attempt to pair students with advisors based on needs. Offer opportunities for

attempt to pair students with advisors based on needs. Offer opportunities for students to gather and work on the dissertation after they finish the coursework

stage of the program.

Recommendations Understand the importance of advocating for one's own needs as one moves for Students through the doctoral program. Attempt to finish the dissertation as quickly as

through the doctoral program. Attempt to finish the dissertation as quickly as possible after the coursework stage of the doctoral program. Do not to allow the

dissertation to move to the back burner.

Impact on Society Attrition at any level of post-secondary education is costly to both students and

institutions. Doctoral students are often funding their own education while balancing careers and families. There is great potential financial impact on society if more students' complete programs that they have already invested in heavily.

Future Research Examine the needs of autonomy in people who complete the doctoral program.

Assess student needs and compare the results with advisor behaviors. Conduct a study with participants who have not earned a specialist degree. Conduct a study to determine the degree to which finances played a role in a students' decision to discontinue working toward the doctoral degree. Study the impact of taking time off after completing the coursework and comprehensive exam stage of the pro-

gram.

Keywords retention, attrition, doctoral program, cohort, self-determination theory

INTRODUCTION

A doctoral degree in education continues to be the area with the longest time to degree (Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). The time to complete an educational doctorate continues to increase and is now at 12.7 years (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Reasons students do not persist are plentiful and have been the focus of many research studies (Castro, Garcia, Cavazos, & Castro, 2011; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012) and books (Tinto, 1975, 1993).

Vincent Tinto (1975, 1993) is well known for his research on college student persistence and retention. His research on undergraduate students found that they must feel academic and social acceptance in order to persist in post-secondary education. Similarly, graduate student attrition cannot be blamed on one factor, instead there are interactions of multiple factors that can be categorized as student factors or institutional factors (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011).

PURPOSE

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand reasons students in the dissertation stage of part-time cohort-based Ed.D programs did not persist and to understand whether and how students' needs of autonomy, relatedness and competence were met during their doctoral program.

The overall research question guiding this study was: What are the experiences of Ed.D students who leave their part-time cohort-based programs during the dissertation stage and decide not to finish the degree requirements?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The doctoral degree has become a family of doctoral degrees, including the traditional Ph.D. with a focus on research, and the professional doctorate including the Ed.D (Wildy, Peden, & Chan, 2015). A rationale developed by the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (Perkins & Lowenthal, 2014) found the Ed.D to be a professional practice degree that prepares graduates to apply research-based knowledge and to generate contextually-based knowledge that both improve and advance educational practice.

The first professional doctorate was awarded by Harvard University in 1920 and referred to as an Ed.D Harvard's program resembled the PhD model in which there are four elements: a course component, a series of

program progression points, a qualifying exam, and a dissertation (Wildy, Peden, & Chan, 2015). This close resemblance between the PhD and the Ed.D is causing programs to rethink the Ed.D degree, evidenced by the fact that Harvard admitted its final Ed.D cohort in 2013 (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2018). Yet the Ed.D persists elsewhere and institutions with the Ed.D program owe it to their students to help them be successful in their desire to complete their degree programs.

Attrition from doctoral programs is high, exacting a large toll on students in the form of form of personal financial and professional expenses (Burkholder, 2012). Many factors conspire to keep doctoral students from finishing their programs (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Student factors and institutional factors are reviewed below.

STUDENT FACTORS

Some students embark on the journey to pursue a doctoral degree without adequate preparation (Crook, 2015). Students who are below the average in terms of academic ability have difficulty completing the transition stage but beyond the transition stage, academic ability has no significant effect on completing any of the other stages (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012). Success in the final dissertation stage takes more than academic ability. Many students leave their doctoral program during the dissertation stage (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012).

The dissertation writing stage can be isolating, unstructured, and depersonalizing (West, Gokalp, Pena & Fischer, 2011). Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding and Bade (2014) outlined the many demands on doctoral students, explaining that students' time is being divided between family, work, daily demands, and academics that can all contribute to attrition during the dissertation stage.

Social support can go a long way toward alleviating challenges faced by doctoral students in the dissertation stage. For doctoral students, social support comes most readily from their advisors and peers. If a student connects with an advisor, the process of navigating the degree requirements can become much more manageable (Miller, 2013). At the graduate level, the relationship between the student and advisor may be consider a mentorship.

Tinto (1975) outlined the feeling of belonging as the degree to which faculty impart acceptance, support, and encouragement. Having a cohort group may contribute to students' sense of belonging, which would overcome one of the contributions to persistence reviewed by Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012).

The ability to navigate a variety of demands is especially important for women seeking a doctoral degree. While women have higher education rates than men, the trend ends after the master's degree, at which point there is a one and half percent difference between genders in completion of doctoral degrees, with men in the lead (Castro, et al., 2011). Castro et al., (2011) found that women attributed success in their doctoral journeys to individual attributes, such as independence, internal locus of control, resolve, and perseverance as well as mentors and peer support.

A majority of the literature on the doctoral student experience has tended to focus on full-time students, thereby neglecting the growing body of part-time doctoral students on U.S. campuses (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012). Enrolling in a traditional, residency-based doctoral program is not a viable option for those who must support a family or who have an employment situation that is otherwise satisfactory (Perkins & Lowenthal, 2014). Students who are enrolled in part-time programs benefit from cohorts, which allow for additional peer support.

The definition of cohort can vary based on use. In the book *College Student Retention*, Tom Mortenson defines cohort as the identification of a clearly defined group or cohort of students at one point in time and place with specific demographic and enrollment characteristics (Seidman, 2012). Given the growing body of the doctoral student population in the U.S., more research is warranted that better assists faculty, administrators, and policy-makers in understanding the distinct needs and experiences of part-time doctoral students (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012).

INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS

Doctoral programs seek applicants with diverse perspectives and experiences that inform their academic work, their research, and the higher education community (Bersola, Love, Stolzenberg, & Fosnacht, 2014).

The time these students invest in pursuing a doctoral degree is extensive and increasing in the area of education (Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, & Bade, 2014; Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, & Bade (2014) indicated student persistence can be influenced as early as the admissions process.

"Helping students understand the requirements to successfully complete a doctoral program during a program orientation can help them make an informed decision concerning whether to pursue the degree. Further, understanding doctoral persistence can help faculty plan instructional strategies and programs to better support students in the completion of their program" (p. 294).

Literature on the lengthy college admission process at the graduate level is minimal (Bersola et al. 2014). Given the amount of work students and faculty must do in a doctoral program and knowing that persistence and retention is a real issue, program personnel must be conscientious about who is admitted (Perkins & Lowenthall, 2014). Perkins & Lowenthall (2014) found that many more application pieces are required by public, campus-based programs than are required by either private or non-traditional (online only) institutions. The pieces required by programs range from relatively simple (an application, names of references, and official transcripts) to those that require the Graduate Record Exam, a writing sample, actual letters of reference, and so on.

The structure of a doctoral program can vary depending on the issuing institution and the type of doctoral degree being pursued. The professional doctorate, a relatively new emergence and a shift toward more relevant, field-based doctoral studies incorporating applied rather than pure research, is becoming a global phenomenon (Wildy, Peden, & Chan, 2015). Programs that recognize the challenges associated with transitioning from the structured coursework to the unstructured dissertation writing by building a connection between the skills needed for both stages increase persistence (Jimenez, 2011). Having a cohort of peers who experience the same stress together may provide an opportunity for students to collaborate on stress management techniques.

Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012) recommended a cohort model, yet research on cohort models in education doctoral programs is lacking. West, Gokalp, Pena, and Fischer (2011) defined a doctoral cohort as a group of students who begin at the same time and emphasize the benefits of networking, support, ease in scheduling and satisfaction after graduation. Students in a cohort are better prepared for leadership roles and experience better student-to-faculty relationships than non-cohort members (West et al., 2011).

Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012) outlined four stages of the doctoral program, a) the entry stage, b) the skill and development stage, c) the consolidation stage, and d) the completion stage. Tinto (1993) outlined three stages as a student maneuvers throughout the doctoral degree process, transition, candidacy and dissertation. Baker (2016) conducted a literature review of the stages of doctoral education and categorized three stages: knowledge consumption, knowledge creation, and knowledge enactment. West, et al. (2011) reported two stages: the course stage, which is structured and familiar, and the dissertation stage which is unstructured and unfamiliar. Tinto's (1993) first and second stages could be considered dependent stages due to their structured format while his third could be classified as independent or unstructured and unfamiliar to the student. For the purposes of this study two stages will be referenced. Stage one will indicate the time in which a study completes coursework and examinations that lead to their acceptance as a doctoral candidate. The final stage or the second stage will refer to the dissertation writing stage of the doctoral program.

COST OF DISCONTINUATION

The doctoral endeavor is a costly one, and the cost of attrition is even higher (Burkholder, 2012). Ampaw and Jaeger (2012) found that students who are responsible for financing their education with personal funds take longer to finish their degree. Market conditions affect persistence and doctoral degree completion. Students must consider factors such as unemployment rates and the potential salary levels of positions that may be available to them as a result of the degree completion. They have a very personal financial interest in completing their degrees and increasing their earning power as a result, and conversely spending money on education without earning a degree exacts a high cost.

Cohorts models were implemented in an effort to decrease doctoral student attrition. A small amount of research supports the cohort model (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; West et al., 2011), however attri-

tion still exists in a cohort model. The current study is a phenomenological study of doctoral students who left their part-time cohort-based Ed.D programs. This study was conducted to determine reasons for attrition and to provide potential suggestions to increase persistence.

SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

Self-Determination Theory is a broad framework for the study of motivation indicating social and cultural factors may facilitate or inhibit people's sense of initiative (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Deci and Ryan (2000) indicated that the basic needs autonomy, competence, and relatedness can be supported by appropriate environments and if they are done well, can be seen as the most effective ways to motivate and engage individuals to increase their performance, persistence, and creativity. Self-Determination Theory supports the work of Tinto (1993) which indicates a student's academic and social needs must be met for them to persist in achieving their degree.

Self-Determination Theory is a broad framework of human motivation. Self-Determination Theory argues that how a person perceives their needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence are met indicates their level of initiative. Tinto (1993) researched the needs of undergraduate students and determined that their academic and social needs must be met in order for them to persist in post-secondary education. His findings have been applied to students at the graduate level. Self-Determination Theory provides a new lens in which to examine the needs of students in the final stage of an educational doctoral program. Relying on the findings of Tinto and the research of Self-Determination Theory, this study examined if and how part-time cohort-based Ed.D students perceived their needs of autonomy, relatedness and competence to be met during their doctoral programs through student and institutional factors.

RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

The first author was a student in the final stage of a part-time cohort-based Ed.D program and conducted all of the interviews. The second author is a professor who has taught in a part-time cohort-based Ed.D program for almost 20 years. A phenomenological methodology was used during this study, as the researchers conducted interviews focusing on the reasons that doctoral students do not persist. Crotty (1998) stated that in phenomenology researchers set aside the knowledge they have been taught and "open ourselves in their start immediacy to see what emerges" (p. 82). We bracketed our experiences and beliefs to ensure they were not influencing the perceptions of the participants. As Yin (2014) indicated, the researchers do not have the control to manipulate the findings of the study. Researchers must engage in reflexivity, a process used to identify potential biases a researcher may have throughout the study in order to be aware and bracket out interfering factors and remain true to the purpose of the study (Krefting, 1991). Bracketing our perceptions and experiences through memos and journaling was a way to ensure we did not interject them into the words of the participants. Qualitative researchers must recognize that their perspective could influence the study but should not keep the research from moving forward (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007). Engaging in bracketing and recognizing our biases provided a way to recognize our perspectives and separate them from that of the participants.

METHODS

The intentions of this research study were to discover factors that contribute to attrition in part-time cohort-based Ed.D students who completed their coursework and comprehensive exams yet did not complete their dissertations. Participants provided insight into how their self-determination needs (autonomy, relatedness, and competence) were met during the two stages of their educational doctoral program.

The methodological approach that best fit the study of doctoral students who do not persist through writing the dissertation is phenomenology. Phenomenological research provides an opportunity to discover rich detail in a variety of areas of study. A phenomenological study focuses on understanding a phenomenon that has already occurred, therefore, the researcher does not have the control to manipulate the components of the study (Yin, 2014). The meaning and the process are important to the study. "Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 37).

Qualitative researchers have various forms of data to collect that help tell the story of the phenomenon. A conversational or dialogic style of interview encourages the participants to share their experience (Foley & Valenzulela, 2008). Researchers consider the questions that will be asked to obtain the greatest detail of the participants experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). A hermeneutical phenomenology occurs when an interpretive process takes place in analyzing the lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). This phenomenological study sought to understand the attrition phenomenon in part-time cohort-based Ed.D students who were in the final stage of the doctoral program.

EPOCHE AND BRACKETING

"The task of the phenomenologist is to depict the essence or basic structure of experience" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016 p. 26). Due to the intense emotion often associated with phenomenological research, the researcher must set aside, or bracket, their beliefs to ensure they are not interfering with the structure and elements of the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Bracketing personal beliefs and experiences allow the researchers to enter a state of heightened consciousness because they have set aside their own experiences to become aware of personal prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions. The process of setting aside personal experiences is called Epoche which is a Greek word that translates to "refrain from judgement" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Moustakas (1994) explains that in the Epoche, the everyday understandings, judgements, and knowing are set aside and the phenomena are revisited. The ability of researchers to bracket their prejudices and assumptions are debatable, yet the process is common practice in a phenomenological study.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL REDUCTION AND IMAGINATIVE VARIATION

Phenomenological reduction refers to the process of returning to the essence of the experience to derive the inner structure or meaning in and of itself (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To understand the essence of the phenomenon it must be isolated. The task, in phenomenological reduction, is to derive in textural language what one sees, not only in terms of the external object, but also the internal act of consciousness, the experience such as the rhythm and relationship between phenomenon and self (Moustakas, 1994). In addition to bracketing, which was explained in the previous section, the researchers practice the process of horizontalization, laying out all of the data for examination and treating the data as having equal weight (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Horizontalization is "an interweaving of person, conscious experience, and phenomenon…every perception is granted equal value" (Moustakas, 1994 p. 96).

The researchers clustered significant statements to derive meaning and identify themes (Creswell, 2013). "The significant statements and themes are then used to write a description of what the participants experienced. They are also used to write a description of the context of setting that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon, called imaginative variation" (Creswell, 2013 p. 82). Moustakas (1994) shared the idea of imaginative variation, tasking researchers with writing about their own experiences and the context and situations that influenced their experiences. Creswell (2013) explained what happens once the structural and textural descriptions are captured, "the researcher then writes a composite description that presents the 'essence' of the phenomenon, called the essential, invariant structure" (p. 82). The focus of the passage is the common experience of all participants and should leave the reader with a better understanding of what it would feel like to experience the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

PARTICIPANTS AND SAMPLING

Creswell (2013) indicated, "There is a narrow range of sampling strategies for phenomenological studies" (p. 155). Participants with direct experience and knowledge of the phenomenon are critical sources of data in a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2013). Van Manen (1990) indicated that phenomenological studies require that participants have original experiences.

Purposeful sampling was used in this study. Creswell (2013) identified three major components of purposeful sampling, including, defining the participants in the sample, the types of sampling to be used, and the sample size necessary for data saturation. Maxwell (1996) supported the use of purposeful sampling by describing it as a strategy in which particular individuals are selected deliberately to provide information that cannot be collected from other subjects.

The participants in this study were students who were enrolled in part-time cohort-based Ed.D programs and who completed their coursework and comprehensive exams yet did not complete the dissertation stage of their programs. Interviews were completed until data saturation was achieved. Polkinghorne (1989) suggested between five and 25 participants for a quality phenomenological study.

To find participants for the study the first author engaged in nominated sampling, which is best used in obtaining input or recommendations from a third party (Sammons, 2010). An email was sent to directors of part-time cohort-based Ed.D programs asking them to share information about the study with prospective participants. Interested participants were asked to contact the first author directly to obtain more information regarding the study and the participant responsibilities. Participation was completely voluntary upon satisfaction of the nominated, purposeful criterion sampling methods (Creswell, 2013; Sammons, 2010).

Once prospective participants responded to the first author, indicating a desire to share their experience, she responded with an email providing details of the study and explaining the time commitment and expectations of the participants. Due to participants in various locations, all interviews were conducted over the phone. Once seven participants were interviewed we had reached data saturation, the point in which data collection provides no new information or insights into the phenomenon being studied (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

DATA COLLECTION AND PROCEDURES

While there is no single approach to interviewing that could be call phenomenological (Seidman, 2013), best practice for phenomenological interviews are described by Seidman (2006) as a three-part process. The approach we took is also consistent with Atkinson's (1998) notion of a life story interview, focused on the phenomenon of part-time Ed.D students in cohort programs who did not finish their dissertations.

- 1. Life history: the interviewer's task is to put the participant's experience in context, by asking him or her to tell as much as possible about him or herself, in light of the topic up to the present time. The first interview is an opportunity to build a meaningful relationship with the participant.
- 2. Contemporary experience: The purpose of the second interview is to concentrate on the concrete details of the participants' present lived experience in the topic area of the study. We will ask them to reconstruct these details. This core interview should last between 60 and 90 minutes.
- 3. Reflection on meaning: In the third interview, participants are asked to reflect on the meaning of their experience. The question of "meaning" is not one of satisfaction or reward, although such issues may play a part in the participants' thinking (pp. 17–18).

The goal of the interviews was to gather information regarding the participant's life experiences (Atkinson, 1998; Van Manen, 2014) and insight into how they interpret the world (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Seidman, 2013). The first author conducted semi-structured interviews with participants to gain the individuals' personal perspective on the phenomenon. Informal social conversations between the researcher and participant provided a setting in which the participant can explain their perceptions. It is important the interviews were not too rigid and allowed for flexibility so the participant could provide a personal experience of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Seidman, 2013). Interviews were conducted over the phone, due to the participant's physical distance from the researcher. These interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and transcribed verbatim, just as would have been done if the interviews were face-to-face. Each of the three interviews with all seven participants lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, with the first and third interviews tending to be shorter than the second, or core, interview.

Due to the sensitivity of the research, participants were protected by changing their names and telling their story in a comprehensive way that eliminated individual features that provide identifying information (Creswell, 2013). Protecting the identities of the participants and the institutions they attended provided them a safe environment in which they could share their true experiences.

Data Analysis

Data in this study were derived from responses to the initial recruitment email, verbatim transcriptions of recorded interviews of participants and additional notes taken during interviews. The data collected were used to explore the meanings of each individual's phenomenon as they experienced it.

There are two stages of data coding. During the first, the first author assigned codes to chunks of data. During the second stage, she worked with the results of the data coded in the first cycle. Descriptive, emotional, and causation coding (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014) were each applied. The codes created throughout data collection related to one another in coherent ways and were ultimately part of a unified structure. The codes of autonomy, competence, and relatedness from Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory were not forced on the data, but rather the data were examined in light of Self-Determination Theory. Autonomy, relatedness, and competence all emerged as salient codes in the data, however autonomy and related arose as more salient codes than competence.

CREDIBILITY

A researcher's credibility can be confirmed by ensuring responses are those of the participants and not the researcher. Anfara, Brown, and Mangione (2002) suggested creating an "audit trail" (p. 30) which includes transcriptions of interviews. Another way to establish credibility as a researcher is to engage in member checks with the participants (Stake, 1995). Once interviews were complete and transcribed, the first author shared transcripts with participants to ensure that we were reflecting their voice and not inserting our biases researchers.

TRANSFERABILITY

Using thick, rich description is a way to ensure transferability or external validity (Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 2013). Transferability is described as "the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be transferred to other contexts with other respondents—it is the interpretive equivalent of generalizability" (Anney, 2014, p. 277). In addition to conducting research until data saturation is achieved, we described the participants' experiences in rich, thick detail which allowed their experiences to be transferred to other populations, although it is important to note that the participants were enrolled in part-time cohort-bases Ed.D degrees and their experiences may not be transferrable to those pursuing other types or formats of doctoral degrees.

CONFIRMABILITY

Confirmability is demonstrated by including the use of an audit trail, triangulation, and maintaining a journal (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Utilizing these techniques can ensure the research "could be confirmed or corroborated by other researchers" (Anney, 2014, p. 279). In addition to member checks the first author maintained a journal that provided the chance to record her biases and experiences as a researcher. Krefting (1991) supported these practices when he wrote, "Triangulation of multiple methods, data sources, and theoretical perspectives tests the strength of the researcher's ideas" (p. 221).

DEPENDABILITY

Creswell (2013) suggested that in qualitative research "Rather than reliability, one seeks dependability that the results will be subject to change and instability" (p. 246). As she progressed in research and data collection, the first author sought feedback from the second author. To ensure dependability, in the study we engaged in an audit trail, member checks, and bracketing.

DELIMITATIONS

The scope of the study was delimited to participants who completed the first stage of a part-time cohort-based Ed.D degree but did not persist through the dissertation stage of their programs. Students were enrolled in cohort programs that consisted of coursework, comprehensive examinations and writing a dissertation. The study sought to understand if and how these students' self-determination needs of autonomy, relatedness and competency were met during the first stage of the program versus the final stage and how that factored into their decisions to leave their doctoral programs.

LIMITATIONS

This study is limited by looking at students pursuing an Ed.D in part-time cohort settings. The findings from the study may not be transferrable to students in a residential Ph.D. program. Similarly, the study is not trans-

ferrable to other students enrolled in other degree programs outside of the cohort model. The experiences of the participants were varied in part due to the fact their motivations for seeking the degree were varied.

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

The purpose of this study was to understand reasons students do not complete an Ed.D after they have completed the coursework and comprehensive examination stages of part-time cohort-based doctoral programs. The study examined whether students felt their needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness were met during the coursework stage of the program and again during the dissertation writing stage of the program. The study was guided by the research question: What are the experiences of part-time cohort-based Ed.D students who leave their programs during the dissertation stage and decide not to finish the degree requirements?

Seven participants, who had completed the coursework and comprehensive exam stages of an Ed.D program at various universities in the United States were selected for a series of three interviews. Participants included four males and three females.

COMPOSITE PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS

Table 1 provides an overview of the seven participants in this study. All participants were adults with careers in education, two of whom left the education field for careers in finance. The table includes information regarding sex, years of post-secondary education, and career description. Participants were given a pseudonym to protect their identity. The institutions these students attended are not revealed to protect them also.

NAME	SEX	HIGHEST DEGREE EARNED	YEARS OF POST- SECONDARY EDUCA- TION	DISCIPLINE
Bob	M	MMA	10	Retired
Jim	M	MA	15	Financial Advising
Arlene	F	Ed.S.	16	Educational Consultant
Louise	F	Ed.S.	12	Education Administration
Tallie	F	Ed.S.	13	Education Consultant
Heaton	M	Ed.S.	9	Education Administration
Wilfred	M	Ed.S.	13	Education Administration

Table 1. Participant Demographics

The following narrative will provide a profile for each of the seven participants, including information regarding the following seven areas: (1) educational history – a summary of the participants education and work history to provide context into their beliefs about education and career path; (2) reasons for and motivations behind enrollment – insight into the reasons participants began pursuing an Ed.D. and the motivation behind their educational aspiration; (3) feelings of autonomy-the participants feelings of autonomy during the coursework and dissertation stages of the program; (4) feelings of competence-the participant's feelings of competence during the coursework and dissertation stages of the program; (5) feelings of relatedness - the participant's feelings of relatedness during the coursework and dissertation stages of the program; (6) reasons for attrition-understanding why participants chose to discontinue working on the dissertation stage of the program; (7) feelings after making the decision to discontinue the program - participants began to discuss feelings they experienced after making the decision not to complete the doctoral degree.

BOB

Following his retirement from the insurance industry, one day Bob was on his way to teach as an adjunct when he walked past a display of folders with information about an Ed.D program at a well-known state uni-

versity. He picked up a folder and was drawn to the program's emphasis on leadership. Bob ended up successfully completed the two years of coursework and the comprehensive exams.

Bob recalls the first summer of classes "lit a fire under him." As classes progressed his fire for learning began to dim, but he appreciated the social construction of knowledge throughout the coursework.

During the coursework stage of the doctoral program Bob felt a relatedness to his classmates. But his feelings changed when he entered the dissertation stage of the program, "I didn't feel like I had any support. I didn't feel critically connected."

JIM

Jim began working on his doctoral degree while serving as a high school principal, with the goal of becoming a superintendent. He was in one of four cohorts that met bi-weekly for two years with one summer month spent at the university with all cohort members.

Jim was struggling with feeling overwhelmed and overworked as he pursued his doctoral degree. Jim made the decision to switch careers with one semester of coursework and comprehensive exams to be completed. He continued to work on his dissertation and met with his advisor to discuss his topic. After six months of meeting and beginning his research, he found out his advisor was retiring and he had been assigned a new advisor. The new advisor told Jim his topic was not going to work as it was designed for someone pursuing a PhD versus an Ed.D, which is when he quit.

Arlene

Arlene was an elementary school principal who chose to pursue a doctoral degree as a personal goal and with encouragement from her district superintendent. She found out she was expecting a child and was due to deliver during the final summer semester of coursework. She was able to complete the requirements without personally attending the summer session through Skype sessions and by completing some additional requirements. She completed comprehensive exams and all coursework.

Arlene cited two reasons for her decision to leave the Ed.D program. The first was frustration about the opportunities presented to other cohort locations that were not offered to her cohort. The second reason Arlene cited for her decision was due to family conflicts and the realization that of all her outside responsibilities, the dissertation was the only one from which she could walk away.

LOUISE

Louise was hired for the first administrative job she applied. She worked as a curriculum director and elementary principal for four years before she was offered the position of superintendent. She was completing her seventh year as a superintendent at another district at the time of our interview. It was during her second superintendent position that she decided to enroll in the Ed.D program at the same institution where she had earned her Masters and specialist license.

So, in the end, it was a worthwhile experience and even though I didn't complete, I passed the coursework rand passed comprehensive exams. In my mind, that was the harder part but I did it because I had deadlines and the dissertation left me to my own devices and life entered into it.

TALLIE

Tallie started as a high school art teacher and then moved to assistant principal and eventually increased responsibility including athletic director, director of special education and started an at-risk school. Once accepted to her doctoral program, Tallie began taking courses because the weekend class schedule fit her lifestyle and worked well with her schedule. She completed the coursework and comprehensive examinations.

Tallie identified two reasons for the decision to discontinue work on the dissertation. The first was a communication disconnect between a professor who asked the class to work on a quantitative assignment as practice for the dissertation and a new advisor who understood the practice topic to be Tallie's dissertation topic. The

second reason was Tallie's mother's failing health and the responsibility Tallie had taking care of care. "I wasn't committed to doing it, to be honest."

HEATON

Heaton had a goal of serving his district as the superintendent and was increasing his district level responsibilities. He enrolled in the doctoral program and when he finished classes and comprehensive exams his job responsibilities continued to change causing him to reprioritize and put writing his dissertation "on the backburner."

Heaton did not put himself in the category of people who had quit the program. He had maintained the college's one credit enrollment requirement throughout his career changes and anticipates he will complete the dissertation within the time limit. He did speak to the desire to have an advisor that sets deadlines and holds him more accountable. He also wants his dissertation to be on something he is passionate about, he does not want to complete the dissertation for the sake of completion but with the hope of increasing his effectiveness as an educational leader.

WILFRED

While serving as a superintendent, Wilfred made the decision to pursue his doctoral degree because he knew he wanted to move into a superintendent position at a larger school district and he also hoped it would open other doors. But it turned out that he was able to move to a larger district without a doctoral degree.

I had to step back and say, "What is my priority? What comes first?" and number one was family and number two was my current position and occupation and job. I put myself and my goals...knowing that I am going to retire in the next three to five years, will the doctorate be that necessary if I decide to retire in three years anyway. Whatever type of rationale you decide to use, I weighed my pros and cons and decided yeah, I am just going to have to forgo the doctorate title and no longer continue paying all the money and go from there.

SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANTS

The participants in this study, four men and three women, all of whom were Caucasian, shed light on the decision to discontinue the pursuit of a doctoral degree after they had completed the coursework stage of the doctoral program. Six of the seven participants had earned a Specialist degree in addition to a Master's degree. All of the participants were successful in their careers with two of the participants making the decision to leave the education field for a career in finance. All of the participants expressed a love of education and learning. They shared that not completing the dissertation was one of the first things in education they had not completed which left them disappointed, yet many also shared that the experience had provided the opportunity to grow and learn and that was what they had wanted from the program.

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to understand reasons for attrition in students pursuing a doctoral degree in a part-time cohort-based Ed.D program. The findings of this study were determined through the use of phenomenological data analysis which looks at data thematically to extract essences and essentials of participant meanings (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Using elemental, affective and language methods of coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014), one major theme emerged in answer to the research question.

ONE MAJOR THEME

The major theme that emerged from the data analysis was: Participants' changes in feelings of autonomy and relatedness led them to rethink priorities and personal goals during the dissertation stage of their doctoral program.

For the participants in this study, the decision to pursue a doctoral degree came at a time in life when change was inevitable. They were all working adults, climbing the professional ladder and with it increasing responsibilities. In addition to facing changes in career, they were at a time in their lives when changes in family would

also impact their ability to devote time to a dissertation. From ailing parents to children who needed additional attention, the participants faced it all. In the end, the combination of changes in career and or family as well as changes in their advisor and increased levels of autonomy were more than the participants could manage and the dissertation was what they had to put on the back burner.

Changes in Feelings of Autonomy

Bob and Jim indicated strong feelings of autonomy during the coursework stage of the program and changes in autonomy meant moving from coursework in which they felt they had a lot of autonomy to a dissertation in which they had no autonomy. As they begin to communicate their experiences, it is evident they wanted autonomy in deciding their topic and how they wanted to execute the dissertation and they were not given that opportunity. Both Jim and Bob were unique in that their careers were not in the education field. Bob had retired from the business industry but was teaching as an adjunct and heavily involved in a political career when he entered the program. Jim made the decision to leave education for a completely new career during the final semester of coursework. The control they felt from their advisors regarding how they completed the dissertation was too much for them to stay motivated to continue the work.

Bob:

I felt very competent during the coursework. I enjoyed the readings and thought the overall content was good. Those feelings changed as I moved into the dissertation stage. The few times I did actually meet with the advisor, I was looking for someone to hold my hand a little bit, and maybe you aren't supposed to do that during a doctoral program, but I wanted to since he was changing the design. I wanted a little bit of hand holding and encouraging. I would ask him questions and he would ask questions back. I didn't feel like I had any support. I didn't feel critically connected.

The remaining participants felt as though they did not have a lot of autonomy during the coursework and when it came time to work on the dissertation the sudden freedom was overwhelming for them.

Tallie:

For me, to be confident, I need to know exactly what the expectation is. When you move into a writing phase and the style of writing is very new, to not have the structure, to not have the guidance and feedback was very difficult for me. We never talked about whether I have the skills to actually build this thing. I can read research all day long, I can tell you what it is about, but to actually write, to be able to pull it together in a structure, in a dissertation, No. I think somewhere along the line, if there was coursework in how do you write for a dissertation as opposed to we are going to do this...it would be like assigning a thesis in a high school English class and saying, "go home and write it." Wait, what do I do?

Louise:

I am the kind of person, I need deadlines and I think that is where the dissertation...I mean, I didn't have classes saying I have to have this done at this time and this done at that time. That might have been my downfall. I was feeling lousy and was taking care of my mother and I had the option, in my mind, of putting the dissertation aside. So, I did.

I felt like they had controlled so much and then all of a sudden it was like go and be free. I could have used more guidance. I felt like maybe they thought I should know this because other people seemed to be doing ok and I thought, did I miss a step or something? Something in the middle would have helped someone like me. I probably should have been more vocal and said I wasn't getting it, but at the time, I wondered if that made me look weak.

Arlene:

When you move to writing the dissertation, it is on your own and the supports were not as...they were not there as they had been. Even with your peers and classmates in the class, we were all over the place, so it shifted slightly. There were several of us that didn't

even think about it or talk about it for six months. And that right there, because we had been going for two full years with only a couple of weeks of a break with no courses from start to finish, and when you get into that lull of not having the responsibility it shifts. Other cohorts within our program were working on their dissertation during the last year and we were not. That was very difficult because we were basically coursework, coursework and then you're on your own and have to write your dissertation. They had a weeknight when they would come together and talk about it. They would have conversations about chapter 1, this is what you're looking at here are the things you need to be aware of, are you doing this correctly, bring it and let's talk about it. They were getting all of that and we weren't. Honestly, within our cohort, I don't think we had anyhody finish within a year or two. It took multiple years for people to get their degree, to actually graduate with their dissertation accepted and completed. And, I never did.

Heaton:

When we started the coursework, it was mapped out for you, after that there really wasn't a meeting where you sat down to check in. I need that, check in with me and give me some deadlines.

Changes in Feelings of Relatedness

Bob:

Looking back on it, hindsight being 20/20, what I really should have done is said, "we're not clicking here, can I have another advisor?" But, I didn't, so that might have been my fatal error.

Participants who experienced a change in advisor once they started working on the dissertation had a difficult time establishing a relationship with the new advisor.

Wilfred:

When I finished my classwork, my advisor was retiring and he passed me onto a new advisor. I remember meeting her for the first time and we got along quite well. She did probably all she could, but I guess the relationship I had with my previous advisor wasn't the same. It definitely wasn't her fault at all that I didn't get it done, but things were different. A new advisor, never having her as a teacher or having a class of hers was unique. I can't say we didn't hit it off or we didn't get along because we did, things were just different.

Jim:

If I had to pinpoint one thing that changed from when I was successfully participating and when I quit, it was the relatedness. That was a big factor that changed. I changed advisors, the topic wasn't going to work anymore and I didn't have control anymore.

Heaton:

There was less interaction on the personal level than there was in previous programs like my Master's. I didn't have a relationship with my committee chair, I had never had him as an instructor. I have never...we just...I have talked to him, if I reach out he will return a call and give me some guidance and then I'll never hear again until I reach out a few months or a half a year later. Maybe, I thought, am I a disappointment to him?

Tallie:

When I started (working on the dissertation) my advisor was in the process of retiring. The new advisor is amazing, but unfortunately, I feel like there was a breakdown of communication between my previous advisor and my new one. There was never a conversation of what this candidate needs, how much support is it going to take, what is their level of confidence with the actual writing process?

Changes in Feelings of Autonomy and Relatedness Led to Changes in Priorities

The result in a variety of changes, student and institutional, led the participants to reevaluate their priorities and for many, the dissertation was something that could be pushed aside again and again until it was no longer an option to complete the program.

Tallie:

There was a moment when I had to make some choices, about three years ago. I had to say, I have to be honest with myself. I am spending money, it is silly, I am not making progress, just stop writing the check.

Louise:

I had finished the coursework, I had passed the comprehensive exams, I just couldn't get anywhere on the dissertation, my focus wasn't there, I had other things that had to come first.

Arlene:

The big factor was family time, work time, or dissertation time and I chose the top two. I had to have those. It was a shift in priorities in my life to make that decision. I thought I can do this and then something else would come up and it was like I am not meant to do this, this is a sign I am not meant to do this.

Heaton:

I am in my dream job, I moved on to a larger district and moved my family across the country. When I talk about why I am in this ABD status, the job I am in absorbs too much time, I don't even have time and the frequent changes I have had in jobs and wanting to commit to really serving well. But, some of it is also that I didn't need the degree to get the dream job.

Jim:

My main motivation for making a career change was having more time with my family. The only reward for doing the dissertation was the degree and for me, the degree never really was that big of a deal. It was more about the experience, learning and trying to push myself a bit.

Wilfred:

I had to say I am not going to have the time to get it done. 55-60 hours a week at my job, and the only time I ever found to spend time with my family was after school at night when we were at ball games together or on Sunday, one day a week. I put that all together and said, how much more time and money am I going to spend...I have to put the kids and family ahead of the dissertation.

The major theme that emerged from the 21 interviews conducted with seven participants was that changes in feelings of autonomy and relatedness led participants to rethink their priorities and personal goals. This theme supports the study's theoretical framework, Self-Determination Theory, as shown in Figure 1.

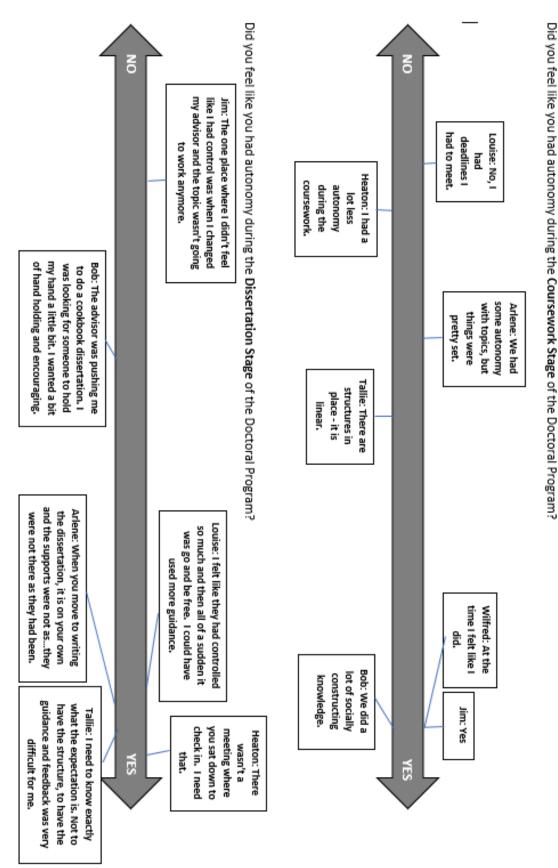


Figure 1. Continuum of Autonomy for all participants

DISCUSSION

The overarching research question guiding the phenomenological study was: What are the experiences of part-time cohort-based Ed.D students who leave their programs during the dissertation stage and decide not to finish the degree requirements? The major theme that emerged to answer this question was: Changes in Feelings of Autonomy and Relatedness Caused Participants to Rethink Priorities and Personal Goals.

The motivation participants felt during the coursework stage of the program changed for everyone during the dissertation stage. Career changes, family changes, and changes in the program structure left participants rethinking their decision to pursue the degree. Many of the participants continued to remain enrolled in the program only to keep putting the dissertation on the bottom of their priority list. Three subthemes explain the changes participants experienced during the dissertation writing stage of the program: Changes in autonomy, changes in relatedness, and changes in priorities.

Changes in Autonomy. Most participants were comfortable in a setting with clear structure. When they moved to the dissertation stage of the program they were responsible for creating their own structure and many of the participants questioned their competence when left on their own. Participants discussed a feeling of hand holding and guidance during the coursework that disappeared when they entered the dissertation stage. They felt frustrated and unsure how to begin the dissertation writing process. These feelings gave the participants reason to continually put the dissertation on the back burner. As careers and families became more demanding and the rigid program structure became less and less familiar. Participants continued to feel less confident in their abilities and slowly lost the motivation to focus on their research.

Changes in relatedness. The relationships participants built with their advisors during the coursework were important as they moved into the dissertation stage of the program. Many of the participants were assigned an advisor they had not worked with or met during their coursework. This disconnect did not provide the participants with the ability to honestly admit their need for greater guidance and structure during the dissertation stage. Participants admitted to feeling overwhelmed by the sudden change in autonomy and needed someone to help guide them through how to move forward with the lack of accountability.

Changes in personal goals. The participants had made the decision to pursue the doctoral degree to increase career opportunities and as a personal goal. For many, they achieved the career they were hoping for while they were in the coursework stage or early dissertation writing stage of the program and realized they did not need the degree to achieve the career. The new career was often time demanding and this, coupled with family needs, often led to the reprioritization of personal goals. Participants began to evaluate the time they had devoted to their education and came to the realization that other areas of their life had to be neglected to continue working on the degree. For many the dissertation was put on the back burner continually until it was finally taken off the priority list altogether.

Providing structure in the way of clear objectives and incentives could make programs more efficient (Bowen & Rudestine, 1992). The programs in which the participants were enrolled offered tight structure in class schedules, coursework timelines, and expectations. Participants were successful when left with little room to reprioritize the classwork expectations. The lack of autonomy they experienced was helpful in ensuring they were successful. As participants moved to the dissertation writing stage of the program the sudden increase in autonomy left them looking for guidance and support the program no longer offered. Participants were required to develop their own timelines and expectations which had held no ramification if left undone. Many participants discussed the desire to have an advisor who would walk them through the steps of the process and check in to see if progress was being made but few were vocal about this need because of fear it would be perceived as a lack of competence. Participants commented that they felt they were supposed to understand how to move forward and they witnessed classmates making progress. They were concerned they must have missed something that others did not. Shulman, Golde, Bueschel and Garabedian (2006) addressed the challenge programs face in balancing the acceptance of a variety of students into the program and understanding how to address the needs of each individual. Many of the paticipants' classmates did continue with the program and finished the dissertation stage successfully. The classmates were either more vocal about their need for less autonomy or more adaptable to the changes than the participants in this study.

The role of the advisor, especially at the doctoral level, is key to ensuring student success (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Lovitts, 2001). Bowen and Rudestine (1992) commented on the key role the advisor plays

in a students' completion of the dissertation. The participants in this study support the importance of the role of the advisor. While none of the participants felt a close connection with the advisor they had in undergraduate or a Master's program, they developed strong professional connections with their advisor in the doctoral program. For some, the retirement of their advisor at the same time they were transitioning from the coursework to dissertation stage of the program was detrimental. Many commented on the inability to connect with a new advisor in the same way they had with the advisor they had gotten to know throughout the program. The lack of connection they were feeling with the advisor was especially difficult because participants no longer had the same relationship with their cohort peers. Each cohort member had moved into an individual process and as one participant said, "you couldn't call up your classmate and ask how to address something that was specific to your research." Participants were looking to their advisor to serve a challenge role as well as a supportive role, which must be balanced to facilitate a successful dissertation process (Spillett & Moisiewicz, 2004).

The changes participants felt in autonomy and relatedness led to reprioritization of their motivation. Participants began pursuing the doctoral degree in hopes of additional career opportunities and to fulfill a personal goal. Many participants moved into their "dream job" while in the coursework stage of the dissertation and began to consider the need for the degree. Time management also became more and more difficult for the students to manage. Stepping into new jobs at the same time they were given additional autonomy was difficult to balance. Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding & Bade (2014) explained the divide on student's time between work, family and academics. Participants supported this idea and made the decision that they could not give adequate time to all three. Something had to give and for the participants it was their academic endeavors. Crook (2015) claimed many doctoral students pursue the degree without giving the decision adequate preparation. Participants supported this finding by indicating they were encouraged to begin the program from a colleague or previous instructor and made the decision to move forward relatively soon after they finished their supervisor license. Students struggled to balance their responsibilities and for many of them, the feelings of tension, anxiety and stress were not worthwhile.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the research currently available on reasons for attrition in students in the final stage of a doctoral degree. Of the 40,000 doctoral degrees awarded annually, 15% are in the field of education (Golde, 2005). The attrition rate falls between 50-70% for professional doctorates or educational programs (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Nettles & Millett, 2006). Understanding the reasons part-time cohort-based Ed.D students attribute to their decision to discontinue working toward the degree could help institutions as they address program structures and students as they consider the decision to enroll in doctoral programs.

The information in this study supports current research indicating the important role of the advisor in a doctoral program. Smith, Mahoney, Nelson, Abel and Abel (2006) found the relationship, or lack of, between a student and their advisor can mean the difference between completing the degree and withdrawing from the program. The participants in this study supported Smith et al.'s (2006) findings but added to the literature indicating a change in advisor can be detrimental to their continued work on the dissertation. Four of the participants experienced being assigned a new advisor once they had completed coursework and were beginning work on their dissertation. They struggled to make the connection with the new advisor they had with their previous advisor. Without the relationship, they were hesitant to communicate with the new advisor that they needed stricter structure and to be held accountable to timelines.

The study also added information regarding various levels of autonomy necessary for students to thrive in the program. With the professional doctorate becoming increasingly popular (Wildy, Peden, & Chan, 2015) information regarding program structure is important to institutions in ensuring they are meeting the needs of the students. Participants in this study indicated a strong need for decreased levels of autonomy during the dissertation writing stage of the program. At the least, they would have appreciated a gradual shift in the change they experienced regarding autonomy. Many participants commented on the sudden freedom they experienced, as they entered the dissertation writing stage leading them to feel overwhelmed and questioning their competence. For a few of the participants, they did not appreciate the control their advisors were taking over their topic and research. Institutions would benefit from attempting to understand the various needs regarding autonomy and exploring how a program can address them.

Based on the findings in this study, the following includes recommendations for practice for institutions that offer a part-time cohort Ed.D program and for students considering the pursuit of such a doctoral degree.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONS

Based on the results of this study, we have two major recommendations for Ed.D.-granting institutions that employ a part-time cohort model. First, institutions should evaluate students' autonomy needs as they progress through the program and attempt to pair students with advisors based on needs. Second, institutions should offer opportunities for students to gather and work on the dissertation after they finish the coursework stage of the program. These recommendations could increase doctoral student retention and decrease institutional costs associated with lost revenue due to doctoral student attrition.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STUDENTS

Based on the results of this study, we offer three major recommendations to prospective or current Ed.D students in cohort programs. First, students should endeavor to understand the importance of advocating for their own needs as they move through the doctoral program. Second, students should attempt to finish the dissertation as quickly as possible after the coursework stage of the doctoral program. And finally, students should not allow the dissertation to move to the back burner. The third recommendation in particular echoes the exact words of a number of participants of this study. Students can learn from others' mistakes and in order to make it more likely for them to be able to complete their Ed.D degrees.

IMPACT ON SOCIETY

Attrition at any level of post-secondary education is costly to students, institutions, and society. Doctoral students are often funding their own education while balancing careers and families. Institutions suffer from lost tuition when students do not persist. There is great potential benefit to society if more doctoral students' complete programs in which they have already heavily invested.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) is a useful lens through which to examine doctoral students' attrition. Self-Determination Theory argues that how a person perceives their needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence are met indicates their level of initiative. The major theme that emerged from the 21 interviews conducted with seven participants was that changes in feelings of autonomy and relatedness led participants to rethink their priorities and personal goals.

Suggestions for future research include an examination of the needs of autonomy in people who complete the doctoral program, an assessment of student needs and to compare the results with advisor behaviors, a study with participants who have not earned a specialist degree, another study to determine the degree to which finances played a role in a students' decision to discontinue working toward the doctoral degree, and yet another study examining the impact of taking time off after completing the coursework and comprehensive exam stage of the program.

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BIOGRAPHIES



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Catherine Wilson Gillespie, PhD, is Professor and Associate Dean at Drake University School of Education in Des Moines, Iowa, where she has worked for 22 years and taught in the doctoral program for almost 20 years. Dr. Gillespie earned her B.A. from Wellesley College, her M.Ed. from Lesley University, and her Ph.D. from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. Her early research was in the area of early childhood education. Since 2008, her research has focused on eating disorder recovery. She published the book *Putting Together the Pieces of Eating Disorder Recovery* in 2018, which is available on Amazon. The current project is a collaboration with one of her doctoral advisees, Ellie Mae Burns, Ed.D.