A Scholar-Practitioner Examination of Experiential Learning: Student Perceptions of the Benefits of a Study Away Experience

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine doctoral student perceptions about an experiential learning summer study away program involving one Texas educational leadership doctoral (Ed.D.) program. Students shared their perceptions about how the four-day study away trip advanced their professional and educational development in becoming more effective scholar-practitioner leaders. Data were collected and analyzed from a completed end-of-course reflective assignment involving students who participated in the study away program. After coding the data and identifying the common themes that emerged from the reflective writing narratives, there were four overarching themes that were derived from the students' responses: (1) encouraging collaborative campus-level decision making; (2) understanding the various contexts and environments of various public school campuses; (3) recognizing the importance of stakeholder trust within the educational setting; and (4) examining the experiential observations within the context of leadership theory and research. The researchers conclude that the experiential learning experience positively impacted the development of scholar-practitioner leaders. The authors further discuss the potential benefits that study away programs can have for other Ed.D. programs considering this option and offer recommendations about how faculty and site-based administrators can work together incorporating similar study away programs for their respective doctoral students.

Keywords: experiential learning, study-away, scholar-practitioner, doctoral students

Categorization: Practice, Qualitative, Leadership

Introduction

Since the turn of the 21st century, there has been a movement in higher education to provide students experiential learning opportunities (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). It is important to note, however, that experiential learning is not a new pedagogical concept. A non-traditional educational concept, experiential learning is rooted in the thought process that while students are learning in a classroom setting, they should also be engaging with real world experiences (Kolb, 1984). Currently, it is highly unlikely for a university or college to not offer at least one of the following common experiential learning activities for their undergraduate and graduate students: internships and fellowships, workshops, hands-on laboratories, community research projects, study away, field trips, field work, clinical simulation, student teaching, and volunteer opportunities (Kent State University, 2022; The University of Tennessee, n.d.).

The benefits of engaging students in experiential learning activities are impressive and span across the spectrums of both academic and professional fields (George et al., 2015). In this line of thought, research indicates experiential learning can be an effective tool for faculty to provide "students with hands-on learning exercises that complement their in-class education" (Miles et al., 2005, p. 24) as well as increase students' competency in "soft skills" (i.e., collaboration, confidence, leadership, and communication) often needed for professional employment (Bayerlein, 2015; Trudie, 2021; Wang et al., 2014).

University doctoral program initiatives include increasing the number of experiential learning activities. Lam et al. (2018) detailed how experiential learning activities fit into the recent undertaking to revise and update doctoral programs to include experiences that develop students' personal learning. However, creating spaces and opportunities needed for experiential learning beyond the traditional classroom is not an easy task at the doctorate level (Armsby, 2012). Colleges and universities struggle to provide doctoral students with a learning environment that provides holistic support, increases satisfaction, and promotes persistence and retention (Nwenyi & Baghurst, 2013). One reason for these challenges can be attributed to the demographic characteristics of doctorate students. Many doctoral students are full-time employees who are enrolled in college on a part-time basis (Perry, 2012). Given their professional status, many doctoral students do not have a direct need for the experiential learning opportunities offered to undergraduate and master's level students such as internships, and they often do not have the luxury of taking days off from work for weeks involving long study abroad trips, even if the trips are framed around professional development.

One method by which faculty and administrators can better foster the development of doctoral students is to provide students with experiential learning engagement via study away trips embedded within the coursework. While this call-to-action applies to the doctoral level in general, the purpose of this paper is to emphasize the importance of study away experiences within Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) degree programs.

Considered the highest professional degree for educators, coursework and class discussions in Ed.D. programs tend to emphasize elements of practice instead of emphasis on theoretical research often found in the Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degree path. Many Ed.D. programs in the United States incorporate a cohort model where a group of students enroll together, take core classes together in a coordinated, sequential fashion over the course of three-to-four-years, and complete the culminating assessments (i.e., comprehensive exams; dissertations) into the path toward completing the degree (Browne-Ferrigno & Jensen, 2012; Hay, J. B., & Reedy, K., 2016; Zambo et al., 2014). An archetypical Ed.D. classroom consists

of students between the ages of 30-to-60, who hold administrative roles in public schools (i.e., teachers, assistant principals, principals, superintendents) or in academia (i.e., academic advisor, program coordinator, instructor) (Perry, 2016).

Understanding the unique needs of these professional students, Ed.D. faculty design curriculum with learning objectives aimed to help students develop "strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills such as communication, analytical, and problem-solving skills" (AACU, n.d., para. 1), hone leadership skills and abilities to effectively lead organizational change (Zambo et al., 2013), and learn how to theoretically and practically apply research-based "toolboxes to help them address the high-leverage problems" faced as educational practitioners and leaders within their educational organizations (Perry, 2012, p. 44). The accomplishment of these learning and developmental tasks are gaining increased importance as the need for more effective educational leaders continues to increase on an annual basis. Relevant for both the K-12 and higher education settings (Mrig & Sanaghan, 2017; Stein, 2016), this claim has recently gained increased urgency within the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. For example, since the Spring of 2019, school leaders have made difficult decisions regarding physical campus closures (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020), learning assessments, and instructional models (Chamberlain et al., 2020), student and employee safety (Aagaard & Earnest, 2020), and "post-covid" initiatives (Zhao, 2020).

This study provides scholarly insights into how experiential learning from a summer four-day study away trip advanced the development of students enrolled in a doctoral program to become more effective scholar-practitioner educational leaders. While some scholars have analyzed study away programs within master's level educational leadership programs (Mitchell Jr. & Westbrook, 2016), there continues to be a lack of scholarship on the topic among Ed.D. programs. The overall purpose of this research study was to investigate how a study away experience yielded increased insights into educational leadership conceptual frameworks, strategies, and applied techniques. To accomplish this goal, data was collected and analyzed from completed end-of-course reflective assignments from involving doctoral students who participated in a four-day study away program. Based on the results, it is evident that this experiential learning experience did impact the development of scholar-practitioner educational leaders. This paper further discusses the potential benefits that study away programs could have for Ed.D. programs (i.e., recruitment, buy-in, retention) and offers recommendations on how faculty and program administrators from other Ed.D. programs can incorporate similar study away programs for their doctoral students.

The Scholar-Practitioner: An Ed.D. Concept

Contemporary Ed.D. faculty across at least 100 college and universities in the United States focus their pedagogical efforts on the development of scholar-practitioner educational leaders (The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, 2021; Perry, 2016). What exactly is a scholar-practitioner? In defining the term, Horn (2002) observed that a scholar-practitioner is an individual who has the ability and desire to examine the "interplay between theory and practice" (p. 83). Expanding on this definition, Bouck (2011) labeled scholar-practitioners as leaders who take part in "meticulous academic endeavors with experiences and knowledge inherent to membership in their craft to form the effective, change-centered practices" (p. 203). Educational leaders have been encouraged to incorporate a scholar-practitioner model in their daily administration and decision-making responsibilities for nearly two decades (Mullen, 2003; Schultz, 2010).

In the educational setting, a scholar-practitioner leader engages, learns, and applies theories, conceptual frameworks, and recommendations from academic scholarship into his or her practical educational

setting. By basing one's leadership actions and decision-making upon a combination of learned knowledge from academic research and practical work experiences, a scholar-practitioner leader develops "an innovative and intellectual form of school administration" (Lowery, 2016, p. 34). The scholar-practitioner approach has also been referred to as bridging the existing gap between the disconnected spheres of research and theory (Godwin & Meek, 2015). English (2002) called this theory-practice gap "the Gordian knot" (p. 1) of professional practice.

The scholar-practitioner model has been found to be effective in enhancing the abilities of leaders and administrators to contextually analyze problems within their respective educational systems (Herbert, 2010). Incorporating the concept of a scholar-practitioner into the setting of an educational leader, Niño et al. (2007) claimed that "a scholar-practitioner is a school leader who uses what he or she has learned, desires to learn more, and actively participates as a school leader" (p. 39). In essence, a scholar-practitioner is an individual who approaches educational leadership with a growth mindset enhanced by innovationand improvement, and one who is influenced by current research findings that address similar issues and challenges experienced within the school organizational setting or context.

Study Away Programs

The concept of study away is relatively new within the higher education setting (Sobania & Braskamp, 2009). Whereas study abroad programs typically function around international travel, study away experiences are more geographically localized and dependent on the university in which students are enrolled. Mitchell and Westbrook (2016) defined study away as "an experiential learning opportunity with a travel component within the United States" (p.1056). Such travel-to-learn experiences within the United States has been an integral part of internships, but only recently have universities provided study away opportunities that are integral to a course, particularly for programs at the graduate levels (i.e., Master's, Doctoral). According to Stinnett and Oregon (2018), the concept of 'study away' involves the idea that students can "experience domestic" and national-oriented learning opportunities that can provide "positive, career-altering experiences" that do not require international travel (p. 455). It can also be argued that while study away programs and study abroad experiences offer similar learning goals and cultural competence objectives, study away trips are more easily accessible and inclusive for students (Sobania, 2015). Similar to study abroad trips, study away programs also provide opportunities for professional networking, career opportunities, and knowledge of current practices that can enhance professional development that cannot be provided in a traditional classroom setting (Stinnett & Oregon, 2018).

Study away opportunities for graduate students "provides authentic global experiences for students closer to home while enabling them to earn credits for their degree" (Rotoli, 2021, para. 1). Additionally, there exists a wealth of untapped student professional and cultural experiences to be attained by postsecondary students who are provided with opportunities to expand coursework by going beyond the borders of one's postsecondary institution (Engberg, 2013; Sobania & Braskamp, 2009). By participating in study away experiences, students can "actively engage with diverse local, national, and international communities" that involve diverse, rich professional experiential learning (Engberg, 2013, p. 467). Students traveling and studying within their own countries, and often even within their own states, can interact with diverse individuals and gain a better "understanding of truth and greater sense of self" (Engberg, 2013, p. 467).

Conceptual Framework

Similar to the John Dewey's pragmatic teachings during the 1930s (1997), Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT,1984) posited that college students learning new "knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (p. 41). For this new knowledge to occur at a deeper level, the learner must play an active role in the learning experience (Kolb & Kolb, 2018). Providing students with this type of environment requires faculty to expand their pedagogy beyond outcome-centric activities often implemented in traditional lecture courses (Kolb, 2015). Deeper levels of learning are obtained when faculty can deliver activities and assessments structured around the professional and personal experiences of the learner (Kolb, 1984). In the instance of doctoral students enrolled in Ed.D. programs, including "real world" discussions, reflections, and out-of-classroom engagements within the occupational setting of educational leaders where they can reflect upon shared contextual problems of professional practice results in a deeper understanding of leadership behaviors.

The four stages of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning process are when a student: (a) takes part in a concrete experience; (b) reflects upon the experience itself; (c) critically thinks about how the experience can be applied in other phases of life; and (d) actively implies learned material, strategies, skills, and techniques from the concrete experience. Regarding Kolb's first step of experiential learning, some scholars criticize the concept of what Kolb means by *concrete experience,* a term that has been referred to as "highly muddled" (Bergsteiner et al., 2010, p. 32). However, there are several concrete experiences that can and do occur within the higher education learning setting.

The second step in the four-stage cycle of experiential learning is reflecting upon the experience. During this second step, students have the opportunity to "learn from the unfolding, to make connections between events, make new meaning, and develop new perspectives" (Tyler & Lombardozzi, 2017, p. 236). After a student has had the opportunity to engage in this concrete experience, regardless of activity type, the process of reflection "creates meaning through observation and inward reflection upon previously acquired knowledge and concentrates on what the experience means to the individual" (Young et al., 2008, p. 30). Building on initial observational reflections, students conceptualize the overall experience and establish practical conclusions within their personal and professional settings in the third step of critical thinking. Finally, in the fourth step of experiential learning, students can actively imply the learned knowledge from the study away experiences, reflections, and conceptualizations from the first three steps. The model is designed as such so experiential learning ultimately shapes and impacts students' future individual decision-making and actions.

Method

This qualitative study examined doctoral students' perceived value and practical application of the experiential learning they encountered in a short-term, domestic study away trip. To accomplish this objective, investigators implemented an intrinsic single-case study research design (Yin, 2012). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the intrinsic case study design is utilized by researchers to gain understandings and insights involving a bounded case (i.e., an activity, program, or academic course) that "presents an unusual or unique situation" (p. 99). The investigators categorized the analyzed study away program as a bounded case due to the lack of research involving domestic away experiences embedded within Ed.D. coursework.

Study Context

Faculty in the Department of Educational Leadership and Technology at the focus university designed the educational leadership course with an embedded summer four-day study-away experience (Rust & Morris, 2012). The overall aim of the course was to offer doctoral student practitioners in the educational leadership program the opportunity to learn about and develop a better understanding of how educational leaders at various campus levels (K-12 and higher education) address the myriad academic needs of diverse learners, approach organizational management, and utilize theoretical perspectives and data in decision-making situations. During the study-away experience, doctoral students visited two large Texas urban public school districts and one postsecondary public four-year institution. While visiting these three sites, doctoral students toured school facilities, met administrators, faculty, and staff, and engaged in discussions related to the professional practice of educational leadership.

On the first morning of the study away trip, faculty and students met to conduct role call and to load onto a chartered bus. After a three-hour ride, they arrived to their first stop -- the seventh largest public-school district in the United States (and largest in Texas). During their visit, students met with educational leadership teams and toured two campuses in the district to gain a perspective on the varying leadership approaches used to oversee a large urban school district to increase student learning and success. An area superintendent presented data on the school system. Following this presentation, two campus principals discussed how they encouraged a culture of trust on their campuses, directly linking their approaches to the schools' successes regarding teacher empowerment and collaboration, teaching innovation, and academic success of their respective students.

After visiting with the urban school district, the doctoral students traveled to meet with faculty and administration at a university within a large state system. Due to the distance between the school district and the university, the faculty and doctoral students stayed overnight in a hotel. During the overnight stay, the faculty and students went out to eat together after which over half of the students engaged in extracurricular activities. Upon meeting at the university campus the following day, the students learned how the postsecondary, public four-year institution developed and delivered academic programs to students who continued as educated practitioners to proactively impact culturally diverse elementary and secondary learners in their respective community. The partnerships established to create a successful higher education program for a predominately Hispanic population provided insights into a connection of learning involving public and higher education for the benefit of many regional communities.

Following the visit at the university, the faculty and doctoral students went to a K-12 school district with one of the most successful dual credit programs in the state of Texas. The main purpose of the third and final destination was to allow doctoral students to learn about the school district's implementation of the dual credit program through a community college and how school administration, teachers, and staff worked together with the college to deliver the program to a diverse student population in the southwest region of the state. During the visit, campus representatives presented information on how parents were encouraged and recruited into the school's GED completion program, explained the vocational training certification curriculum, and detailed the importance of offering independent studies. The Ed.D. students observed the proactive, enthusiastic collaboration of the school district with the college to holistically educate the junior high and high school students under their direction.

As part of the specific doctoral course requirement, students were tasked with completing a narrative reflection after the completion of the trip. This assignment was designed to provide the students with a platform to reflect on and discuss what they learned during the trip and to highlight in detail major scholar-practitioner based "take-aways" from the experience.

Students were given two weeks to write and submit their multiple perspectives and summary reaction final reflection paper. The average length of the narratives from the seven doctoral student participants was 8.5 pages, with a range between five-to-14 pages.

Participants

The target sample involved 29 doctoral students who took part in the summer four-day study-away program and completed the narrative assignment for the educational leadership course at the focus university. Of the 29 doctoral students, seven students (24.1%) agreed to participate in the study. Participants ranged in age from 30-to-60 years old. Participant demographic characteristics are displayed in Table 1, which provides gender, race, and professional setting (K-12 or Higher Education). Additionally, the table provides professional longevity (years as an educational leader).

Table 1

Demographics of Doctoral Student Participants (*n* = 7)

Student (numeric code)	Gender	Primary Race	Current Professional Educational Setting	Total Years as an Educational Leader
1	Female	AA	K-12	18
2	Male	W	K-12	29
3	Male	W	K-12	23
4	Female	W	HE	20
5	Female	W	HE	9
6	Male	AA	HE	8
7	Female	AA	K-12	6

Note. AA = African-American; W = White; K-12 = kindergarten through 12th grade public school; HE = institution of higher education.

Data Collection

While student reflections were collected as a part of the learning objectives for the course and trip, they were not designed initially to be a part of a research study. Students were solicited ex-post-facto and informed that reflection papers were the sole source of data for the research study. Upon agreement, students emailed their reflective papers to a third-party individual who then compiled the documents, redacted student identifiable information, and assigned each received document a numbered digit based on order of document receipt (i.e., 1, 2, 3). Finally, the third-party individual emailed redacted documents to the first author.

Data Analysis

This study utilized the open, axial, and selective coding methodology often used in qualitative research (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). By incorporating this analysis approach, data were coded in three phases. The student end-of-course narratives were first inductively analyzed on an individual basis, which resulted in openly identified and named general codes based on words and phrases in the student narrative responses (Patton, 2015). This initial phase resulted in unique codes for each of the seven narratives. Next, the scholars took part in selective coding to collapse codes into larger themes across all seven narrative responses. After the coding process was completed, all four researchers discussed their interpretation of the analysis until an agreement was made on the overarching emerging themes (MacPhail et al., 2016).

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Results

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Emerging themes from the coding process were framed within a scholar-practitioner educational leadership perspective. The reflective take-aways noted by the doctoral students about the concrete experiential learning experience provided insight into how the domestic study away program provided practical engagement regarding effective educational leadership behavior, successful techniques, and strategies for institutional success. The four themes included: (a) encouraging collaborative campus-level decision making; (b) understanding the various contexts and environments of various public school campuses; (c) recognizing the importance of stakeholder trust within the educational setting; and (d) examining the experiential observations within the context of leadership theory and research. In the following subsections each of these themes are presented along with qualitative data from student end-of-course reflective narrative assignments.

Campus-Level Decision Making

Each of the seven doctoral students wrote about how the study away program provided them with practical techniques to improve campus-level decision making within their educational institutions. This was especially the case with the experiential learning experiences at the large urban K-12 school district, the first stop during the study away program. Due to its size and complex structure, this partnering educational entity operates as a decentralized school district, meaning that campus principals and administration are provided with resources and autonomy in making campus-level decisions. In their reflections, the doctoral students recognized the benefits of keeping decision making at the campus-level. One of the student participants noted that it is important for campus principals to have autonomy because principals "are in the trenches and have first-hand knowledge about what students need." Another

student noted that after the scheduled presentations and school tours, "I understand how important decentralization and autonomy has played in the success of these schools." Most students agreed that the school district was successful because it operated in a lead principal model, whereby principals are allowed and expected to function as "the chief decision makers when it comes to budget and making decisions that fit their [campus] communities." In summary, the lessons the students took away was the importance of administrative hierarchy and the decision-making model chosen by those in charge.

Context of the School Campus

Educational institutions, in the K-12 level and higher education settings, operate within a complex ecological environment. Most of the doctoral students recognized that for campus leaders to be successful, they must gain an understanding of the cultural surroundings and campus context. Many of the presenters associated with the partnering school districts and university during the study away program highlighted the diversity of their student populations. For example, one of the visited K-12 school districts emphasized that there were over 150 different spoken languages within the surrounding local communities. After listening to superintendents, principals, teachers, faculty, directors, and deans talk about their campus' success stories, several students linked the highlighted achievements to the educational leaders' understanding of the context of their institutional environments. The educational leaders at both visited K-12 school districts, according to one doctoral student, created valuable learning environments by addressing barriers and issues associated with "poverty, immigration, instruction for multiple dialects, and personal needs of their students and families."

One student was interested in the leadership strategies at a K-8 Academy within the district. The student observed that the campus was able to succeed in such a complex environmental context because of the administrator's efforts to learn about the existing cultural differences among families. This student wrote, "building relationships is key to student success." The K-8 Academy had a wrap-around program, where school employees were tasked with going into the community and developing relationships with family members in an effort to learn about unique needs of students and the community at large. As the student noted, these wrap around programs help "families to remove obstacles that may traditionally stand in the way of learning" and enable the schools to create "an environment of not only learning, but outreach."

Trust within the Educational Setting

Another major reciprocal learning "take-away" many of the doctoral students identified in their reflections was the importance of establishing and maintaining trust within an educational setting. A common observation was that in order to create a successful learning environment, teachers, staff, and administrators must feel trusted and empowered. An educational leader's ability to build trust and increase empowerment is enhanced buy-in, passion, and internal drive from all stakeholders. When speaking about the benefits of trust among all stakeholders and the need for personal buy-in regarding the successes and achievements of students, one doctoral student noted district employees "go so far as to use their own money and personal time to go above and beyond for their students." Another doctoral student recognized how one of the visited school's culture was rooted in trusting relationships and encouraged motivation. This student wrote, "[The campus leader] positively impacts student learning and student development by creating an environment where teachers and administrators want to come to work." Trusting relationships extend beyond the school walls. "Successful schools," wrote one student, "begin with building strong and trusting relationships with their community." Efforts made at

understanding campus context within the leadership of the partnering school district is beneficial in that it also creates trust among families and community members.

Context of Theory and Research

As noted earlier, the doctoral program at the focus university strives to develop, foster, and train scholar-practitioner educational leaders. During their coursework, the Ed.D. students are taught how to frame educational problems of practice and leadership philosophies within their course reading assignments. In addition, they reflect upon learned material and the experiences of others and incorporate the reflections into their personal occupational settings. Students incorporated these components of the scholar-practitioner model within their reflective narratives. For example, when referencing the campus-level decision making strategy implemented at the visited school district, one student tied this leadership strategy to Wiseman's (2010) work on multiplying leadership. This student wrote "relating to Liz Wiseman's (2010) philosophy, a leader needs to be able to multiply leadership and understand that decision making needs to be dispersed accordingly." These students made connections between their observations and the research-based constructs and theoretical frameworks learned in class that helped them reflect upon their personal, conceptualized problems of practice for school improvement.

Throughout their end-of-course assignments, all seven students reflected on the observed leadership philosophies, administrative strategies, and highlighted challenges and issues. Most participants concluded their reflective narrative assignments by relating and conceptualizing these observations to the betterment of their own campuses, which represents the third stage (abstract conceptualization/thinking) in Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theoretical Model. Doctoral students from both K-12 contexts and higher education settings participated in this type of conceptualized reflection. One student, a Director of Special Education in a K-12 school district, took special note in her reflection on a presentation from a state education agency member who was working with one of the visited school districts. She noted that this presentation "provided me insight on organizational leadership from the [state's] perspective." She continued, "For me as a member of the district leadership team who develops our plan, I can share what I learned…to ensure our targeted intervention plan addresses how we are going to improve student outcomes."

Another student, a campus-level administrator at a private university, noted how one of the districts analyzed results from state accountability tests and was amazed that campus leaders "do not wait for scores to come back to start programming for next year." This strategy, according to the doctoral student, implements "a constant growth model" and needs to be implemented within his professional higher education setting. He admitted, "I know many times in higher education, I have observed instances where departments have waited on things just to receive information that they already knew." As a result, he concluded his assignment with a declaration to take this strategy of leadership and incorporating it at his work, so he could "encourage institutions to be good stewards of their time and resources."

Discussion

The summer four-day study-away trip experiences, along with the end-of-course reflection assignment, can be framed within Kolb's four stages of experiential learning. For example, the doctoral students took part in a study away program that was embedded in a course and occurred outside of the traditional classroom setting (concrete experience/experiencing). Students reflected upon their observations in an end-of-course writing assignment (reflective observation/reflecting). In their reflective writing for this assignment, students conceptualized the experience into their own professional practices and detailed

how their new gained knowledge and leadership observations could benefit their own decision-making processes, leadership philosophies, and actions as educational leaders (abstract conceptualization/thinking). Students then had the opportunity to act upon their plans of actions noted in their reflection assignments within their own educational contexts (active experimentation/acting). Based on the findings from our study, we encourage other Ed.D. faculty and administration to implement experiential learning opportunities within their doctoral programs. Given the importance of networking with fellow professionals in the field, reflecting on experiential observations, and undertaking practical active engagement, we argue that experiential learning opportunities can be a resource and tool in providing opportunities to better develop more fully professionally doctoral students, especially regarding the fostering of scholar-practitioner educational leaders enrolled in Ed.D. programs.

Detailed earlier, three of the authors from this study were faculty in the focus university's Ed.D. program. In fact, two of the authors were the lead instructors for the educational leadership course from which the study away program was embedded. From the perspective of these Ed.D. instructors, the tours, discussions, and engagements associated with the visiting of the three campuses during the study away program assisted the K-12 and higher education doctoral students in better understanding the importance for educational leaders to develop and implement institutional cultures built on innovation, trust, and social awareness. Additionally, these visits provided a fertile background for several students and faculty to subsequently develop dissertation topics and further educational research. Over one year after the study away trip, most of the seven doctoral student participants referred to their reflections during their comprehensive examinations, as they were able to advance their connections of their observational practical experiences with theories learned in the classroom.

This study did not conduct research to analyze if and how the doctoral students complete active experimentation, which is referred in Kolb's (1984) fourth stage of experiential learning. However, based on anecdotal observations of listening to and reading about the doctoral students speak about the study away experience in classroom discussions and writing assignments, we believe survey data on the topic would indicate the learning opportunities provided during the summer four-day study-away program did forge a lasting impression that impacted the future operations in many doctoral students' educational environments.

In addition to their learning and application to professional situations, the participants indicated that the study away program positively influenced their socialization within the doctoral program. Of the seven participants, four doctoral students highlighted the social bonding that took place during the trip. "This trip," according to one student, "provided an excellent opportunity for Cohort 16 to grow closer and provided a much-needed social experience that could lead to a greater bond within the group." For example, one student noted that "this trip provides many experience that cannot be quantified through data or on paper." In their reflection, this student wrote about the memories made while going out to eat with his classmates, going to spend time with colleagues at Top Golf, and watching a basketball game with the two faculty mentors in the hotel lobby. On the later of the three experiences, the student wrote "this to me showcased that they cared about us past this doctoral program." A third student believed that the study away program positively impacted his perception of the approach to class and increased doctoral program persistence,

Prior to the perspectives trip, I did not have a close relationship with most of my fellow cohort members. However, at the end of this trip I gained true friendships through shared experiences during the site visits, conversations had on the bus and hotels, and extracurricular activities such as going to Topgolf [*sic*]…with

the relationships that I grew during the trip I now feel more comfortable to speak up and ask questions in class, draw connections between K-12 and higher education, and have an overall better attitude about the doctoral program.

As evident by these quotes, the trip potentially increased student buy-in into the Ed.D. program, persistence within their cohort model degree paths, and helped them feel more comfortable with engaging in class.

A supplemental finding, the investigators found the phenomenon of socialization insightful and worthy of addressing. One reason for this is due to enrollment numbers in Ed.D. programs in the United States declining at a concerning rate. According to the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (NCSES, 2020), the number of students who have received Ed.D. degrees from institutions in the United States have steadily waned over the past two decades. Based on a recent report, the tally of graduated doctoral students in such programs has experienced a consistent drop since 1995, with a most recent decrease from 5,098 in 2015 to 4,716 in 2020, a 7.5% decline (NCSES, 2020). One reason for this phenomenon could be the growing criticism of the Ed.D. degree itself, as some scholarly critics believe that the academic path is professionally irrelevant and lacks rigorous credentials within academia (Dunlap et al., 2015; Flessa, 2007). Conversely, proponents claim that there is a current, broad revitalization and restructuring within Ed.D. programs that is increasing academic rigor, educational quality, and overall scholarly reputation of the degree path (Allen et al., 2016; Finch et al., 2021; Zambo et al., 2014). Incorporating more study away programs such as the one outlined in this study could potentially be used a resource for retention, as well as enabling Ed.D. faculty to also utilize the benefits of study away trips as a potential tool for recruiting students into their doctoral programs.

Final Thoughts

The Ed.D. is a professional research doctorate degree path built on developing the practical abilities and skills of school leaders (Perry & Abruzzo, 2020). As such, faculty, students, and alumni of Ed.D. programs are trained scholar-practitioners who strive to untie the "Gordian Knot" of educational leadership. The results of this study would suggest that experiential learning opportunities offered beyond the traditional classroom, within the context of study away programs, can be an effective method at accomplishing this difficult, and at times daunting, task. Designing and planning study away trips are effective when embedded by faculty in doctoral program coursework. Public school districts, K-12 schools, and higher education institutions can work together to establish and provide study-away programs for Ed.D. students to better enhance their development as scholar-practitioners (Sharpe et al., 1997). Working together, members of leadership teams (i.e., principals, district office administration) and representatives of universities' Ed.D. programs (i.e., faculty, department heads) can provide valuable out-of-classroom experiences to enhance the learned knowledge and practical experiences of scholar-practitioners to become more adept at addressing and solving problems within their institutions.

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