

THE EDUCATIONAL PURSUIT: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF
ATTRITION IN THE FINAL STAGE OF AN
EDUCATIONAL DOCTORAL PROGRAM WITHIN A COHORT MODEL

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
DEDICATION.....	vi
ABSTRACT.....	vii
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	2
Purpose and Research Question.....	4
Theoretical Framework.....	4
Significance of the Study.....	5
Researcher Positionality.....	5
Summary.....	6
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	8
Institutional Factors of Attrition.....	9
Student Selection.....	9
Program Structure.....	10
Advising.....	11
Student Factors of Attrition.....	13
Academic Performance.....	14
Financial Investment.....	14
Part-Time Enrollment.....	15
System of Support.....	16
Cohort Model.....	17
Stages of the Doctoral Program.....	19
Self-Determination Theory.....	20
Summary.....	22
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY.....	23
The Qualitative Approach to Research.....	23
Philosophical Assumptions and Research Design.....	24
Epistemology: Constructivism.....	24
Theoretical Perspective: Self-Determination Theory.....	24
Methodological Approach.....	26
Epoche & Bracketing.....	27
Phenomenological Reduction & Imaginative Variation.....	28
Applying Phenomenological Principals to the Study.....	29
Participants and Sampling.....	29
Data Collection Procedures.....	30
Interviews.....	31
Rapport.....	32
Recording and Storing Data.....	32
Ethical Considerations.....	32
Institutional Review Board.....	33
Informed Consent.....	33
Confidentiality.....	34

Report of Findings.....	34
Data Analysis and Procedures.....	34
Design Issues.....	35
Credibility.....	35
Transferability.....	36
Confirmability.....	36
Dependability.....	37
Delimitations.....	37
Limitations.....	37
Summary.....	38
CHAPTER 4. PARTICIPANT PROFILES.....	39
Composite Profile of Participants.....	39
Bob.....	40
Jim.....	46
Arlene.....	53
Louise.....	58
Tallie.....	63
Heaton.....	69
Wilfred.....	75
Summary of Participants.....	80
CHAPTER 5. FINDINGS.....	82
Theme 1: Passion for learning led participants to pursue the degree.....	83
Family History of Educators.....	84
Love of Learning.....	85
Theme 2: Motivation was built during the first stage of the program.....	88
Autonomy needs were met which led to increased competence.....	89
Relatedness needs were met which led to increased competence.....	91
Theme 3: Changes in feelings of autonomy and relatedness caused participants to rethink priorities and personal goals.....	94
Changes in Autonomy.....	94
Changes in Relatedness.....	97
Changes in Priorities.....	99
Summary.....	102
CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	103
Summary of the Study.....	103
Summary Answer to the Research Question.....	110
Theme 1: Passion for learning led participants to pursue the degree.....	110
Theme 2: Motivation was built during the first stage of the program.....	111
Theme 3: Changes in feelings of autonomy and relatedness led participants to rethink priorities and personal goals.....	112
Discussion of Themes with Prior Literature.....	113
Theme 1: Passion for learning led participants to pursue the degree.....	114
Theme 2: Motivation was built during the first stage of the program.....	115
Theme 3: Changes in feelings of autonomy and relatedness led participants to rethink priorities and personal goals.....	116

Implications of the Study	118
Recommendations for Practice.....	120
For Institutions.....	120
For Students.....	121
Recommendations for Further Research.....	122
Conclusion.....	123
Final Reflection	124
REFERENCES.....	125
APPENDIX A: SAMPLE RECRUITMENT EMAIL.....	141
APPENDIX B: EMAIL TO INTERESTED PARTICIPANTS	142
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW SCRIPTS AND QUESTION	143
APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT	146
APPENDIX E: CONTINUUM OF AUTONOMY	149

LIST OF TABLES

Table 4.1 Participant Demographics	39
Table 5.1 Themes & Subthemes	82

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to four amazing women. To my Grandmas Rita and Bonnie who would be so unbelievably proud of me and who I wish were here to celebrate this achievement with me. To my Mom, your unending support, unwavering belief in me, and the fact you tell me to suck it up when I need to hear it has made me into the woman I am today. I am so proud to call you my mother and also my friend. And finally, to Sophia who will accomplish so much more than I could ever dream. You inspire me to be a better person and I can only hope I live up to the person you see in me.

ABSTRACT

Attrition at any level of post-secondary education is costly to the institution and the students. At the doctoral level, students are often funding their education through personal finances while balancing the demands of their careers and families. The time to complete the doctoral degree is growing steadily and 40-60% of students are making the decision to discontinue working toward the doctoral degree. This study examines seven students who made the decision to discontinue working on their educational doctorate after they had completed all the coursework. Through a phenomenological study, the participants were interviewed three times each to gain a better understanding of the student and institutional factors that impact attrition.

Self-Determination Theory is a broad framework for the study of motivation. Self Determination Theory cites three needs that must be met for a student to be successful in an endeavor such as a doctoral program. Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness foster the highest quality of motivation and lead to enhanced performance, persistence and creativity (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Through the lens of Self Determination Theory, the study explains the reasons students leave a doctoral program during the final stage. The three themes emerged from the participants were passion for learning led participants to pursue the degree, motivation was built during the first stage of the program, and changes in feelings of autonomy and relatedness led participants to rethink priorities and personal goals. Students who made the decision to pursue a doctoral degree were passionate about advancing their education. Participants were motivated to continue working toward the degree, during the coursework stage of the program, because they felt they did not have the autonomy to put the work on the bottom of the priority list and they were related to the curriculum and their cohort peers. Once students moved to the dissertation stage of the doctoral program, they experienced changes in their feelings of autonomy and relatedness. Ultimately, students experienced career and life expectations that caused them to put the dissertation on the back burner until it was no longer possible to complete.

Detailed profiles of the participants are presented and themes that emerged from the data analysis are explored. The study concludes with a summary of the answers to the research question, implications for further study, implications for practice, and reflection. Upon review of the data, the researcher has concluded that the change students experience in levels of autonomy and relatedness make it difficult for student to persist through the dissertation stage of the program. When changes in autonomy and relatedness are coupled with changes in advisors, students reprioritize their goals and the dissertation is not completed.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Today's doctoral students are not typical college students (Dorn, Papalewis, & Brown, 1996). They are not residential full-time students with few additional commitments (Hughes, 1983). They must balance careers, families, finances and school expectations. 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). Attrition at the doctoral level has been researched extensively (Sheridan, Byrne & Quina, 1989; Dorn, Papalewis, & Brown, 1996; Girves & Wemmerus, 1998; Smith, Maroney, Nelson, Abel, & Abel, 2006) and over half of students do not complete their degree (Sheridan, Byrne, & Quina, 1989). Reasons students do not persist are plentiful and have been the focus of many research studies (Castro, Garcia, Cavazos, & Castro, 2011; Dorn, Papalewis, & Brown, 1996; Pauley, Cunningham, & Toth, 1999; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014; Smith, et al. 2006; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012) and books (Lovitts, 2001, Seidman, 2005; Tinto 1975 & 1993;).

Vincent Tinto 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 (Tinto, 1993). Similarly, graduate attrition cannot be blamed on one factor, instead there is an interaction of multiple factors that can be categorized as student factors or institutional factors (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Student factors include finances, motivation, the ability to manage external communities, and demographics (married, sex, age) (Attiyeh, 1999; Berg & Ferber, 1983; Gardner, 2008; Lovitts, 2001; Nettles & Millett, 2006; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Institutional factors are those over which the institution has control and include relationship with advisor, connection to the research and structure of the program, (Girves & Wemmerus, 1998; Lovitts, 2001; Maher, Ford & Thompson, 2004; Smith et al., 2006).

Research on reasons for attrition provide conflicting results. Wao & Onwuegbuzie (2011) and Lovitts (2001) found that most students attribute personal factors as their reason for attrition. Yet, Gardner (2009) found that institutional factors exhibit more influence on a student's persistence.

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 indicate "conditions supporting the individual's experience of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are argued to foster the most volitional and high-quality forms of motivation and engagement for activities, including enhanced performance, persistence, and creativity" (Deci & Ryan, 2000). 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.

Although research on why students do not persist is conflicting, it is agreed that attrition is costly and detrimental to students and institutions (Girves & Wemmerus, 1998; Lovitts, 2001; McAlpine & Norton, 2006;). Students and faculty are impacted by attrition as students who leave the program have wasted time and effort for both themselves and faculty (Lovitts, 2001; Lunneborg & Lunneborg, 1973).

Statement of the Problem

Many students leave the doctoral program during the dissertation writing stage of the process (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Willging & Johnson, 2004;). Tinto (1993), West, Gokalp, Edlyn, Fischer, & Gupton (2011), and Lovitts (2001) categorize the doctoral program in stages. While some research indicates three stages to the program (Tinto, 1993), others narrow the process to two stages (West, et al., 2011; Lovitts, 2001). The two stages can be classified as stage one which includes the coursework and comprehensive exams, and stage two which includes the dissertation. The dissertation writing stage can be isolating, unstructured, and depersonalizing (Ali & Kohun, 2007; West, et al., 2011). 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 (Ferrerde Valero, 2001; Jimenez, 2011). Incorporating a cohort structure may be one way to eliminate the feelings of isolation students encounter (Dorn, Papalewis, & Brown, 1996). A cohort model may provide students an opportunity to feel more integrated with their peers, which would overcome one of the reasons Lovitts (2001) cites for attrition. The ability to effectively manage and cope with stress is strongly correlated with persisting in the doctoral program (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Having a cohort of peers who experience the same stress together may provide an opportunity for students to collaborate on stress management techniques. Having a cohort group may contribute to a student's sense of belonging, which would overcome one of the contributions to persistence reviewed by Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012).

Research has been conducted to determine the reasons students persist in a doctoral program, yet research on students in programs that incorporate suggested persistence models (e.g., cohort models) is sparse. Lovitts (2001) recommended research be conducted on student transitions between the dependent (coursework and comprehensive testing) stages of the program to the independent (dissertation writing) stage indicating that the little existing research explains the transition is affected by program organization and structure. 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).

A small amount of research supports the cohort model (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012 & West et al, 2011), however attrition still exists in a cohort model. The current study is a qualitative study

on students who left an educational doctoral cohort program, which was conducted to determine reasons for attrition and to provide potential suggestions to increase persistence.

Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand reasons students in the second and final stage of a doctoral program did not persist and to understand whether and how student's needs of autonomy, relatedness and competence were met during the first and second stage of the program.

The overall research question guiding this study was: What are the experiences of doctoral students who leave their programs during the dissertation stage and decide not to finish the degree requirements?

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework serves as a foundational component to a qualitative research study (Creswell, 2013). This study will be conducted through a constructivist epistemology and a theoretical framework of Self-Determination Theory. Crotty (1998) related constructivism to phenomenology, he stated that, in phenomenology, researchers set aside the knowledge they have been taught and "open ourselves to the phenomena in their stark immediacy to see what emerges for us" (Crotty, 1998, p. 82). This study will use Self-Determination Theory as a framework to help understand the social needs of students in a doctoral program which recognizes a constructivist view that relies on the participants experience of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2014).

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 a student perceives their needs of autonomy, relatedness and competence to be met during the first and second stages of the doctoral program through student and institutional factors.

Significance of the Study

In 2008, Walker, Gold, Jones, Conklin-Bueschel, and Hutchings reported that there were more than 400,000 people currently pursuing a doctorate indicating the decision to persist toward the degree affects a large number of students. Doctoral students are not traditional residential students, which means their decision to persist toward a degree impacts a population larger than themselves, including their advisors, institutions, and the peers and family who have been supporting and encouraging them through the process. Students who complete the coursework and comprehensive exams are known as ABD (All But Dissertation). Unfortunately, this title has no significance as it is the Ed.D. or Ph.D. that indicate a student has acquired the capacity to contribute original knowledge through research (Association of American Universities, 1998).

Making the decision to pursue a doctoral degree indicates a commitment to a journey with extreme time and financial costs. Leaving a program before receiving a degree is costly for students as over 30% of doctoral students are funding their education from personal finances (Hoffer, Hess, Welch, & Williams, 2007). Understanding the reasons students attribute to their decision to leave the program may be beneficial for students deciding whether they should enroll in a program as well as faculty as they design programs.

Researcher Positionality

This study sought to understand the reasons doctoral students attributed to their decision to discontinue an Ed.D. program during the final stage of the process. Using Self-Determination Theory, a

motivational theory which argues that the level to which an individual's needs of autonomy, relatedness and competence are met influences their initiative and volition (Deci & Ryan, 2000), the research attempted to discover whether a student perceived their needs were met during the first and second stage of the program and if they were a factor in the decision to discontinue the program. As a student in the final stage of an education doctoral program, I bracketed my experiences and beliefs to ensure they were not influencing the perceptions of the participants. As Yin (2014) indicates, the researcher does not have the control to manipulate the findings of the study. Researcher 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 (Johnson, 1997; Krefting, 1991). Bracketing my perceptions and experiences through memos and journaling was a way to ensure I 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 my bias provided a way to recognize my perspective and separate it from that of the participants.

Summary

The need for more highly qualified personnel as a strategic tool for the enhancement of economic health may be attributed to the continual increase in doctoral degrees (McAlpine and Norton, 2006). In addition to the Ph.D. there are a host of doctoral degrees available to perspective students including the Ed.D. or professional doctorate, which among the most widely disseminated (Brown & Cooke, 2010; Shulman, Golde, Conklin-Bueschel, & Garabedian, 2006; Wildy, Peden, Chan, 2015;). Despite the growing popularity of programs and degree seekers, attrition rates sit between 40-60% (Berelson, 1960; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Council of Graduate Schools Ph.D. Completion Project, 2008) with rates in professional doctorates or educational programs falling between 50% to 70% (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Nettles & Millet, 2006).

Researchers divide doctoral programs into stages (Ampaw 2012; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Lovitts, 2001; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Tinto, 1993; West, et al., 2006) with stage one including the coursework and comprehensive exams and stage two defining the time spent writing the dissertation. This study examined reasons students contribute to the decision to discontinue the pursuit of a degree in the final stage of the program. Using Self-Determination Theory as a theoretical framework to understand if and how a student's needs of autonomy, relatedness and competence were met during the first and second stages of the program, the phenomenological study sought to understand the perceptions of students who were enrolled in a cohort model EdD program and made the decision to discontinue before earning their degree.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Almost 400,000 people are currently pursuing a doctorate (Walker, et al., 2008) and more than 40,000 doctoral degrees are awarded each year (Golde, 2005). Of these degrees, 15% are in the field of Education (Golde, 2005). A doctoral degree signifies a student has acquired the capacity to contribute original knowledge through research (Association of American Universities, 1998). Today, the doctoral degree has become a family of doctoral degrees including the traditional Ph.D. with a focus on research and the professional doctorate or Ed.D. (Wildy, Peden, & Chan, 2015). There is great debate about the differences between an Ed.D. and a Ph.D. (Levine, 2005; Perry & Imig, 2008). A rationale developed by the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (Perkins & Lowenthal, 2014), finds the Ed.D. as a professional practice degree that prepares one to apply research-based knowledge and to generate contextually based knowledge to improve and advance practice (Council of Graduate Schools Ph.D. Completion Project, 2008). The Ed.D. or professional doctorate is the most widely disseminated, possibly as a response to the corporate and government perception that post-secondary education is a strategic tool for the enhancement of their respective nations' economic health through highly qualified personnel that will create and maintain invigorated national research and development agendas (McAlpine & Norton, 2006). The growing emphasis on post-secondary education means the educational community can anticipate an increased need for faculty and administrators with doctoral credentials (Pauley, Cunningham, & Toth, 1999). Despite the need for doctoral graduates, research indicates attrition rates between 40-60% (Berelson, 1960; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Council of Graduate Schools Ph.D. Completion Project, 2008) with rates in professional doctorates or educational programs falling between 50% to 70% (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Nettles & Millet, 2006). The reasons graduate students fail to persist pose a complex issue with some responsibility on the universities and some on the students (Kraska, 2008).

This literature review examines attrition rates in doctoral students during the second and final stage of a professional educational doctoral program designed around a cohort implementation model. The review explores institutional factors that lead to attrition; student selection, program structure and advising, the student factors that lead to attrition; academic performance, financial investment, and systems of support, implications of part-time enrollment, stages of the dissertation, and finally the theoretical model within which the study was conducted, self-determination theory.

Institutional Factors of Attrition

Lovitt (2001) found institutional factors exerted more influence on persistence than student characteristics. Research confirms that campuses with higher retention outcomes are conducting sound educational practices (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Institutional context will often provide parameters around the doctoral experience in regard to policies and procedures as well as the larger institutional culture that influences the individual disciplines and department (Gardner, 2009). Before a student commits to a doctoral program, they should be provided all information regarding the demands and expectations of the doctoral program (Smith, et al., 2006). In addition to providing transparent information, institutions are responsible for student selection, program structure and flexibility, advising and mentoring (Smith, et al. 2006).

Student Selection

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). Literature on the lengthy college admission process at the graduate level is minimal (Bersola et al. 2014). The available literature is difficult to generalize due to elimination of the views of students who did not persist (Malaney, 1987). 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 & Lowenthal, 2014). Perkins & Lowenthal (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.

Despite the different focus that exists (practitioner vs. research intensive), Ed.D. and Ph.D. programs do not seem to have markedly different specifications for their degree programs. Education students differ from those in the arts and sciences or engineering in that most education students have had careers before pursuing the doctorate (Shulman, Golde, Bueschel, & Garabedian, 2006). Although most schools of education value diversity and depth of experience in their students, serving such a wide range of students presents significant challenges (Shulman, et al., 2006).

Program Structure

The time a student invests in pursuing a doctoral degree is extensive and increasing in the area of education (Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011; Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, & Bade, 2014). In response to the increasing time to degree, Bowen and Rudestine (1992) found that adding structure to a doctoral program, in the form of objectives, incentives and timelines could make programs more efficient. Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, & Bade (2014) echoed these suggestions and indicate 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).

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). The professional doctorate has a variety (over 300) of different names and abbreviations (Brown & Cooke, 2010). The inconsistency in names and abbreviations supports the vast differences in program structure and focus, yet the professional doctorate is widely disseminated (Shulman, et al., 2006; Wildy, Peden, & Chan, 2015).

The first professional doctorate was awarded by Harvard University in 1920 and referred to as an Ed.D.. Harvard's program resembled the Ph.D. 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 is causing programs to rethink the Ed.D. award, evidence in the acceptance of the final Ed.D. cohort at Harvard University in 2013. Harvard indicates the decision as "a way to better signal the research emphasis that has characterized the program since its inception in 1921, and to strengthen ties with academic departments across Harvard University" (<https://www.gse.harvard.edu/doctorate/edd>).

Advising

Advising plays a significant role in graduate student attrition (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Golde & Dore, 2001; Lovitts, 2001). Inadequate or inaccurate advising, lack of interest or attention on the part of an advisor, and unavailability of an advisor have all been cited as reasons for leaving a program (Bowen & Rudestine, 1992; Golde, 2000). The relationship, or lack of, between a candidate and their advisor can mean the difference between completing the degree and withdrawing from the program (Smith et. al. 2006). If a student connects with their 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. Kogler Hill, Hilton

Bahniuk, and Dobos (1998) define mentorship as a “communication relationship in which a senior person supports, tutors, guides, and facilitates a junior person’s career development” (p. 15). Monsour & Corman (1991) describe the relationship as the advisor not only imparting organized knowledge, but also closely supervising the attainment and performance of certain intellectual skills. Graduate students will develop relationships with many different people throughout their educational journey, peers, professors, and department staff, however Foss & Foss (2008) argue that the student-advisor relationship is the most important. Tinto (1975) outlines the feeling of belonging as the degree to which faculty impart acceptance, support, and encouragement. Involvement at the graduate level means student participation in projects and other activities outside the classroom with faculty and with fellow graduate students (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988).

There is little training on how to be an effective advisor (Smith et al. 2006). Faculty may be repeating the process that was modeled for them (Clark, Harden, & Johnson, 2000; Price, Gozu, Kern, Powe, Wand, Golden, & Cooper, 2005). They may view the process as costly, causing them to be careful in deciding whom and to what extent they are willing to provide a meaningful mentoring relationship (Maher, Ford, & Thompson, 2004). Paglis, Green, and Bauer (2006) found that students with higher verbal aptitude and a strong commitment to the program reported a closer relationship with their advisor indicating faculty may choose to work with newcomers based on a merit system.

Roles played by the advisor may include supportive roles (cheerleader and counselor) and challenge roles (coach and critic). The challenge roles must be balanced with support roles to facilitate a successful dissertation learning process (Spillett & Moisiwicz, 2004). Girves and Wemmerus (1988) report that the size of an institution impacts the formality of a relationship developed between an advisor and advisee. The larger the institution the fewer informal interactions due to policy and restrictions.

A final consideration that must be included when considering the relationship between an advisor and advisee is that of gender roles. Berg and Ferber (1983) found students and faculty of the same sex interacted most comfortably. Due to the large portion of male faculty and female students in each area of study, women students were at an inescapable disadvantage in finding mentors. The disadvantage is an inevitable result of rising proportions of women students without concomitant changes in the makeup of professorial ranks in some fields.

Student Factors of Attrition

On average, doctoral students in schools of education are older; the median age when they receive their doctorate is over 43 and in mid-career (Shulman, et al., 2006). In addition to the responsibilities students face as an adult student, they must also maintain academic performance, securing the finances to fund the degree, and create a system of peer and family support (Smith et al., 2006; Daniel, Schwarz, & Teichler, 1999; Lipschutz, 1993). Rockinson-Szapkiw and Spaulding (2014) expanded on the demands of the students, explaining that students' time is being divided between family, work, daily demands, and academics. Unfortunately, many students embark on the journey to pursue a degree without adequate preparation (Crook, 2015). These students tend to be more vulnerable to factors inhibiting their academic performance because their school-related activities are not the primary objective (Ivankova & Stick, 2007). A responsibility lies with the institution to provide transparent information regarding the structure of the doctoral program and with the student to determine what level of structure they need in a program. A program with little structure may leave students feeling frustrated while a program that is too structured may stifle a student's creativity (Smith et al., 2006). Balancing the time devoted to responsibilities outside academia can lead to tension, anxiety, and stress for students (Ross, Niebling, & Heckert, 1999).

Academic Performance

Girves and Wemmerus (1988) found that grades did not serve as a predictor for student retention at the graduate level. Activities, such as performance on qualifying exams and the ability to do independent research serve as better methods of predicting a student's degree attainment potential. Students who are below the average in terms of academic ability have difficulty completing the transition stage but beyond that the variable has no significant effect on completing any of the other stages (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012).

Financial Investment

Most graduate students are financially independent of their parents and may be supporting their own families (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992). Bowen and Rudenstine (1992) claim that students who are supporting their graduate education may be enrolled part-time which could eliminate the eligibility for institutional funding. Financial support is an important variable in predicting doctoral student retention (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992). Over 30% of doctoral students are funding their education from personal finances (Hoffer, Hess, Welch, & Williams, 2007). The reason these students decide to invest in higher education may be influenced by the perception that the investment benefits will exceed the expected costs (Becker, 1963, Paulsen, 2001; Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012).

Research indicates that students who are responsible for financing their education with personal funds take longer to finish their degree (Abedi & Benkin, 1987; Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Gillingham, Seneca, & Taussig, 1991), are less likely to be enrolled full time and ultimately less likely to complete the degree (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Ott, Markewich, & Ochnser, 1984). Students relying on their personal finances as sources of support are more likely to continually assess the costs and benefits of staying in school (Girves & Wemmerus, 1998). The changes in the expected benefits or costs of education will play a role in persistence decision making (Ehrenberg & Marvos, 1995). Market conditions affect persistence and doctoral degree completion (Ampaw & Jaeger,

2012). Students 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 (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012). Noel-Levitz (2008) found that graduate students in programs with low expected earnings were less likely to persist as students are continually evaluating the financial value of the degree.

Part time Enrollment

The majority of 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). 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). Many studies have found that full-time pursuit of the doctoral program results in higher persistence and completion rates (Clewell, 1987; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Nettles & Millett, 2006). Tinto (1993) suggests that part-time study is more than limited time commitments of part-time students. It extends to the degree to which a student is able to become involved in the intellectual and social life of the student and faculty communities.

An area in which part-time students experience the lessened amount of investment and involvement is with their peers (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). A significantly higher number of students in professional fields such as education and social work enroll part-time as compared to those students in the sciences, where part-time enrollment may be all but non-existent (Biegel, Hokenstad, Singer, & Guo, 2006; Nettles & Millett, 2006; Smith, 2000). Part-time students have been found to be less satisfied with their doctoral experiences (Nettles & Millett, 2006; Neumann & Rodwell, 2009), to be less scholarly engaged than their full-time peers (Biegel et al., 2006; Davis & McCuen, 1995; Nora &

Snyder, 2007), and are often perceived as less committed than their full-time counterparts (Curran, 1987). Ott, et al. (1984) found that students who enrolled part-time were less likely to persist in a doctoral program. However, Ampaw and Jaeger (2012) found positive effects of part-time status on completing the development and research stage. They recognized the finding as counter intuitive reporting the results implied that for doctoral education, when the goals of completing the stage go beyond completing coursework, part-time students may be better positioned to attain their degree.

System of Support

While an advisor is part of a student's network, social support from peers is also necessary. Advisors are supervisors rather than peers, and do not share the same reality as graduate students, they are unable to provide a point of comparison for the individual working on her or his dissertation (Monsour & Corman, 1991). Ivankova and Stick (2007) found that negative interactions with an advisor could be overcome if a student has a support system that attends to the student's needs.

Students are members of a variety of communities, such as family and work. To some extent, persistence is dependent on the degree to which a student can successfully negotiate the competing demands of the different communities (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Tinto, 1993). 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 attribute success in the doctoral degree journey to individual attributes, such as independence, internal locus of control, resolve, and perseverance as well as mentors and peer support. Having a support system can provide students with a secure base from which they derive self-efficacy (Torres & Solberg, 2001). Relying on a support system of peers can be one-way students handle the stressors they experience during the doctoral program

(Smith et al., 2006). One program format that encourages peer support is a cohort model (Gardner, 2009).

Cohort Model

Students who are enrolled in a program part-time benefit from a cohort program that allows 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, p. 33). Demographic cohort descriptions include gender, race or ethnicity, age, and geographic location while academic cohort descriptors can include test scores (ACT or SAT), accumulated credits, college GPA, and year of matriculation. Cohort graduation rate is a measure to indicate retention at the undergraduate level. It is defined as the percentage of an entering class that graduates within three years with an associate's degree, and within four, five, or six years with a baccalaureate degree (Noel-Levitz, 2008). For the purposes of this study, cohort will be defined as Dr. Mortenson has done, and will indicate a group of students who enrolled in a professional doctorate program together, and who completed classes as a group.

Gardner (2009) found students who were part-time in cohort programs (or those programs with a normative expectation that students would be part-time) discussed a tremendously different experience from those students who were one of the few to pursue their degrees part-time. The cohort students talked about knowing that their peers and faculty understood the many demands of their lives and that the program was designed to fit these needs. In this way, the students involved in cohorts spoke to the same level of peer support as full-time students have discussed in previous research (Gardner, 2009; Gardner, 2008).

The retention of students in higher education may depend on the social aspects of learning as much as the intellectual aspects of learning (Sheridan, et al., 1989; Tinto, 1993). Socialization is the

process through which an individual learns to adopt the values, skills, attitudes, norms, and knowledge necessary for memberships in a given group or organization (Gardner, 2008; Kuh & Whitt, 1988). While a growing body of literature focuses on issues related to graduate student attrition and retention, including those of Nettles and Millett (2006), Tinto (1993), and Lovitts (2001), few studies relate to the influences of the socialization experience in graduate school upon underrepresented populations and these individuals' persistence in or departure from their degree programs. Involvement in a cohesive group, such as a cohort, has been shown to create a positive relationship to persistence (Dorn, Papalewis, & Brown, 1996). Unsuccessful socialization contributes to the decision to depart from the degree program (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008). Dorn, Papalewis, and Brown's (1996) findings indicate that doctoral programs, specifically those designed for practitioners in the educational field, need to incorporate support group/cohort components to encourage peer mentoring and group dynamics to improve retention and persistence rates. Imel (2002) suggested that learning in cohort groups is a natural arrangement for adult learners, given their focus on group dynamics, adult development, and adult learning theory.

Dorn, Papalewis, and Brown (1996) found that educators who work together as a team earning doctorates benefit from the experience, share those benefits with their workplaces, and most importantly, tend to find the motivation to complete their doctorates. Brien (1992) stated that the main reason for students persisting in a doctoral program was the support and encouragement from cohort members. A cohort at the doctoral level can be comprised of a group of students who begin at the same time, or a group of students formed to focus on a similar dissertation theme. Cohorts emphasize networking, support, ease in scheduling, and satisfaction after graduation. Faculty notice that cohort members are better prepared for leadership roles and experienced better student-to-faculty relationships than non-cohort members. West, Gokalp, Fischer, and Gupton (2011) inferred that cohort participants gained knowledge not accessible to non-cohort programs. In a study conducted by Burnett

(1999), a cohort model was found to show improvement in student reports of isolation, degree completion, breadth of knowledge and writing abilities due to peer editing, and dissertation quality. A group of doctoral students that becomes highly cohesive becomes committed to the educational success of all members (Dorn, Papalewis, & Brown, 1996).

Stages of the Doctoral Program

To obtain a doctoral degree students complete courses, develop and propose research topics, conduct research, and report findings. This progression for doctoral students creates a systematic process that can be best described by different stages (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012; Tinto 1993). Factors affecting students' ability to move through the completion of coursework into the proposal development stage will differ from the factors that are important in the completion and presentation of research (Tinto 1993). Previous studies on doctoral retention have generally ignored these stages of doctoral education due to a reliance on cross-sectional data (Berg & Ferber 1983; Girves & Wemmerus 1988; Nerad & Cerny 1993; Pyke & Sheridan 1993; Tinto 1993). Presenting only a snapshot of doctoral education, these studies do not consider how the variables within the study are affected by time. The few longitudinal studies available have either focused on descriptive statistics (Bowen & Rudenstine 1992) or limited the fields of study (Ehrenberg & Mavros 1995; Lott, Gardner, & Powers, 2009; Stiles 2003).

Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012) outline 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. Girves and Wemmerus (1988) also outlined three stages: course after the master degree, examination, 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. Lovitts (2001) narrowed it down to two stages: the dependent

stage and the independent stage. West, Gokalp, Vallejo, Fischer, and Gupton (2011) also reported two stages: the course stage, which is structured and familiar, and the dissertation stage which is unstructured and unfamiliar. Tinto's 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.

Self-Determination Theory

People have not only different amounts, but also different kinds of motivation. They vary not only in level of motivation (i.e., how much motivation), but also in the orientation of that motivation (i.e., what type of motivation) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) distinguished different types of motivation based on various reasons or goals for performing. Self-Determination Theory is specifically framed in terms of social and environmental factors that facilitate versus undermine intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Motivations to embark on a doctoral degree may stem from a desire to improve career prospects, professional development, or an intrinsic interest in a discipline (Golde, 2000). Two types of motivation exist on a continuum, internal and external. Internal motivation exists when a person engages in an activity with an outcome that has no consequence other than personal enjoyment (Zuckerman, Porac, Lathin, Smith, & Deci, 1978). This natural motivational tendency is a critical element in cognitive, social, and physical development because it is through acting on one's inherent interests that one grows in knowledge and skills (Ryan & Deci, 2000). As people develop, reasons for behavior may be encouraged by external factors such as rewards or acknowledgement (i.e., extrinsic motivation).

Extrinsic motivation contrasts with intrinsic motivation, which refers to doing an activity simply for the enjoyment of the activity itself, rather than its instrumental value (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Deci & Ryan (1985) developed a sub-theory within Self-Determination Theory that was introduced to detail the different forms of extrinsic motivation and the contextual factors that either promote or hinder internalization and integration of the regulation for these behaviors. The sub-theory is referred to as Organismic Integration Theory (OIT). Organismic Integration Theory explains the continuum of motivation from amotivation (the state of lacking intention to act) to intrinsic motivation an act done for inherent, internal satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Within the continuum are four stages of external motivation. First, external regulation is the least autonomous form of motivation and is done to satisfy an external demand. Second, introjected regulation, like external regulation has an external perceived locus of causality (DeCharms, 1968). Introjected regulation is an extrinsic motivation in which people perform a task because they are pressured to do so or to feel an increase in self-esteem (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Identification is third on the continuum of external motivation. Identification is regulated through the recognition of personal importance, for example, memorizing spelling words because the student understands that they will help improve his reading abilities (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The final extrinsic motivator on the continuum between amotivation and intrinsic motivation is integrated regulation. Integrated regulation is the most autonomous form of extrinsic motivation and occurs when identified regulations have been fully assimilated to the self (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Although Deci and Ryan (2000) outlined a continuum of motivation, this does not imply a developmental process. Behavioral regulation could be adopted anywhere along the continuum depending on a person's prior experiences and personal factors (Ryan & Connell, 1989). However, Chandler and Connell (1987) found that a person's regulatory style does become more internalized over time in accord with the general organismic tendencies toward autonomy and self-regulation (Ryan & Connell, 1989).

There is clear significance for the internalization for both personal experience and behavioral and performance outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The critical applied issue concerns how to promote the autonomous regulation of extrinsically motivated behaviors (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Conditions supporting the individual's experience of *autonomy, competence, and relatedness* are argued to foster the most volitional and high-quality forms of motivation and engagement for activities, including enhanced performance, persistence, and creativity. In addition, Self-Determination Theory proposes that the degree to which any of these three psychological needs is unsupported or thwarted within a social context will have a robust detrimental impact on wellness in that setting (Deci & Ryan, 2000)

Summary

"Persistence can be examined in light of how well institutions establish an environment to meet student's basic needs which in turn motivate their choices and behaviors" (Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014 p. 295). The time to complete an educational doctorate program is increasing as is the demand for increased educational leaders. Discovering the reasons students fail to persist as they pursue an educational doctorate may shed light on how institutions can better prepare and support students. Considering a student's needs, as identified by Self-Determination Theory; autonomy, competence and relatedness, this researcher conducted interviews with students who did not persist through the dissertation stage of the program to determine if and how their needs were thwarted. The experiences of students who did not persist toward the degree, after they completed classwork and examinations may provide institutions with implementable suggestions that could reduce attrition rates in students in the final stage of the doctoral degree.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The intentions of this research study were to discover factors that contribute to attrition in doctoral students who have completed coursework and comprehensive exams yet did not complete the dissertation. Participants provided insight into if and how their self-determination needs (autonomy, relatedness, and competence) were met during the two stages of their educational doctoral program. This chapter will provide an overview of the research design and the methodological approach used to explore the perceptions and experiences of the participants. Information is provided about the participants and materials examined, the methods used to collect data, and the processes involved in the analysis of the data collected, as well as the limitations and delimitations of the study.

The Qualitative Approach to Research

Qualitative research methods focus on an individual's perspective and the meaning they make out of their experiences (Creswell, 2013). This study was conducted using a qualitative research approach because it examined the experiences of students who do not complete the dissertation as part of their doctoral requirements. Qualitative methods were best suited for this study as they allowed for:

- (a) An understanding of the meaning, for participants in the study, of the events, situations, and actions they are involved with and of the accounts that they give of their lives and experiences.
- (b) An understanding of the particular context within which the participants act, and the influence that this context has on their actions.
- (c) The identification of unanticipated phenomena and influences (Maxwell, 1996, p. 18-19).

Reflexivity is important in qualitative research as it allows the researcher to identify their role in the study and consider how their background and experiences may shape the direction of the study (Creswell, 2014). The researcher is a current doctoral student, working on a dissertation after

completing coursework in a cohort program. A close examination of my role as the researcher was necessary to ensure credibility of the study.

Philosophical Assumptions and Research Design:

A researcher's philosophical worldview is their "general philosophical orientation about the world and the nature of research that he or she brings to the study (Creswell, 2014 p. 6). This study was guided by a constructivist epistemology and a theoretical perspective of self-determination theory. These philosophical foundations guided my research as I examined the phenomenon of doctoral attrition on students who were part of a cohort program and completed the first stage of their program.

Epistemology: Constructivism

Epistemology, as described by Crotty (1998) is the examination of how individuals make meaning of knowledge, it is the theory of knowledge (Ozmon, 2011). Constructivism is a perspective that recognizes each individual holds a different worldview (Creswell 2014). Constructivist researchers understand the historical and cultural settings of individuals by focusing on the specific contexts in which they live and work (Creswell, 2014). This study employed a constructivist epistemology because participants' meaning is made through their experience with the environment. Ozmon (2011) explained that in the constructivist epistemology truth "is made (or constructed), not discovered or uncovered" (p. 205). Participants can only describe their perception of reality as it is their truth.

Theoretical Perspective: Self Determination Theory

In educational research there are no "obvious" answers and "much depends on how we decide to look a particular issue, at what level of analysis, and with what goals" (Butin, 2010 p. 58). How we look at the issue is the theoretical framework and within the framework are various related theories and strands (Butin, 2010). Self-Determination Theory is a theory of motivation that was naturally applied to this study. Self-Determination Theory is based on the research of Deci and Ryan and is concerned with supporting our natural or intrinsic tendencies to behave in effective and healthy ways.

Organismic-Dialectical Theory studies how an individual's will power and initiative is impacted by social and cultural factors (Deci & Ryan, 1985), Self-Determination Theory acknowledges the qualitatively different types of motivation and distinguishes between autonomous and controlled types of motivation (Wouters, Croiseit, Galindo-Garre, & Kussurkar, 2016). Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, and Leone (1994) found that when the social context provides needed nutriments such as support for self-determination, the integration process will function optimally, whereas when the social context fails to provide the needed support for self-determination, the organismic process will not function optimally and introjection will result.

Introjection is based on Perls' (1973) definition. Introjection is the internalization that occurs when a person "takes in" a value or regulatory process but does not identify with it or accept it as his or her own. The action becomes something that is done out of threats of guilt or promises of self-approval and results in a person behaving in a way they feel they have to, not that they want to. The result of introjection are feelings of pressure and tension (Deci et al., 1994).

Integration refers to the internalization in which a person accepts responsibility for an action and identifies with the value of the action. Because the person's behavior emanates from within, it is self-determined (Deci et al., 1994; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Koestner, Bemieri, and Zuckerman (1992) found consistency or coherence between a person's behavior and their internal state. Yet in almost every setting we encounter there are certain behaviors and values that are externally prescribed. Extrinsic motivation refers to "the performance of an activity in order to attain some separable outcome and, thus, contrasts with intrinsic motivation" (Deci & Ryan, 2000 p. 71). Self-Determination Theory proposes that extrinsic motivation can vary greatly in its relative autonomy (Ryan & Connell, 1989). Organismic Integration Theory (OIT) is a sub theory within Self-Determination theory that details the different forms of extrinsic motivation from external extrinsic motivation to internal extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Internal extrinsic motivation in its most autonomous form is integration; actions are still

considered extrinsic because they are done to attain separable outcomes rather than for their inherent enjoyment (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Individuals initially perform extrinsically motivated behaviors because they want to feel attached or related to the person who prompts, models, or values the action (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Thus, relatedness, the need to feel belongingness and connectedness with others, is important for internalization (Deci et al., 1994). The more internalized the extrinsic motivation, the more autonomous the person will be when enacting the behaviors (<http://selfdeterminationtheory.org/theory/>). Research indicates autonomy and relatedness, along with competence foster the highest quality forms of motivation and engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET), another sub theory within SDT, indicates people must experience competence in addition to feeling their behavior is self-determined in order for intrinsic motivation to be evidenced (Ryan & Deci, 2000). CET examines how social contexts (rewards, interpersonal controls, and ego-involvements) affect intrinsic motivation. "CET highlights the critical roles played by competence and autonomy supports in fostering intrinsic motivation, which is critical in education, arts, sport, and many other domains" (<http://selfdeterminationtheory.org/theory/>).

This study utilized the views of SDT and its sub theories OIT and CET to discover if and how students perceived their SDT needs of autonomy, relatedness and competence to be met during the first stage of the doctoral program compared to the final stage of the program. Participants were interviewed to determine whether the needs were met or thwarted and if these feelings resulted in the decision to leave the program during the dissertation writing stage.

Methodological Approach

The methodological approach that best fit the study of doctoral students who do not persist through writing the dissertation is phenomenology. A phenomenological research study describes an individual's perceived experiences of a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). Phenomenology has

strong philosophical underpinnings and typically involves conducting interviews (Moustakas, 1994).

Moustakas (1994) writes, “in phenomenological studies the investigator abstains from making suppositions, focuses on a specific topic freshly and naively, constructs a question or problem to guide the study, and derives findings that will provide the basis for further research and reflection” (p. 47).

There are a variety of factors in a student’s decision not to complete the dissertation and phenomenological research provides an opportunity to culminate the “essence of the experiences for several individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2014 p. 14).

Phenomenological research provides an opportunity to discover rich detail in a variety of areas of study. It is important that a researcher has a plan for the phenomenological study beginning by recognizing their own thoughts and biases and then examining the study from a broad view. 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). Maintaining a broad view of the study assists the researcher as they begin data collection.

A qualitative researcher has 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 & Valenzuela, 2008). A researcher considers 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 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 allows the researcher to enter a state of heightened consciousness because he or she has set aside his or her 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 (p. 33). 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 researcher practices 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 researcher clusters 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) continues the idea of imaginative variation, tasking the researcher with writing about their own experiences and the context and situations that influenced their experiences. Creswell (2013) explains 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).

Applying Phenomenological Principals to this Study

As with other forms of qualitative study, there are variations on how a phenomenological study is conducted (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016 p. 28). Phenomenological study requires some understanding of the broader philosophical assumptions and the researcher should identify these assumptions early in their study (Creswell, 2013). In this study, the researcher adhered to the steps described by Moustakas (1994), Creswell (2013), and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) while gathering and interpreting data from interviews.

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 Ed.D. programs and who completed their coursework and comprehensive exams yet did not complete the dissertation stage of the program. 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 I 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 Ed.D. Educational Leadership programs that are organized in a cohort format asking them to share information about the study to prospective participants (Appendix A). Interested participants were asked to contact the researcher 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 participants responded to the researcher, indicating a desire to share their experience, I responded with an email providing details of the study and explaining the time commitment and expectations of the participants (Appendix B). Due to participants in various locations, all interviews were conducted over the phone. Once seven participants were interviewed I 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 Procedures

During data collection researchers must follow specific guidelines and procedures. Data collection includes a variety of activities, including locating participants, establishing rapport, sampling, collecting, recording and storing data (Creswell, 2013). Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) identified interviews as one way that data can be gathered in a phenomenological study.

Interviews. “Qualitative interviewing is a way of finding out what others feel and think about their worlds” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 1). While there is no single approach to interviewing that could be called phenomenological (Seidman, 2013), best practice for phenomenological interviews are described by Seidman (2006) as a three-part process:

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 (Van Manen, 2014) and insight into how they interpret the world (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Seidman, 2013). Van Manen (2014) states that the interview “serves the very specific purpose of exploring and gathering experiential narrative material, stories, or anecdotes that may serve as a resource for phenomenological reflection and thus develop a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon” (p. 317). I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants to gain the individuals’ personal perspective on the phenomenon (Appendix C). 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, 2014; Moustakas, 1994; Seidman, 2013). Interviews were conducted over the phone, due to the participant's proximity to the researcher. Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes.

Rapport. A crucial component of a phenomenological study is building a trusting relationship with the participants (Creswell, 2013; Van Manen, 2014; Yin, 2014). The researcher must balance the relationship with a level of respectful distance to ensure the objectivity of the research is not affected. Seidman (2013) warns against this:

the desire to build rapport with the participant can transform the interviewing relationship to a full "we" relationship in which the question of whose experience is being related and whose meaning is being made is critically confounded. (p. 98)

Throughout the course of the study it was important to maintain an appropriate level of formality, respect and honesty. One way I did this was by limiting the amount of information I shared with the participants about myself and my educational journey.

Recording and Storing Data. Interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants. Following interviews, the audio was transcribed by the researcher. During interviews, the researcher took notes as suggested by Creswell (2014). All notes and transcriptions were collected on a password protected computer of which only the researcher had access.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher must operate under the highest ethical standards. Ethical guidelines exist to ensure subjects participate on a voluntary basis and understand the research project and the expectations of participants, and that participants are not exposed to risks greater than any benefit (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Researchers must consider their role as an insider and outsider within the

study. My role, as a current doctoral candidate in the final stage of the process indicates I am indeed an insider in the setting of the research.

Bogden and Bilken (2007) recommended qualitative researchers must recognize that their perspective could influence the study but should not keep the research from moving forward. Merriam (2009) suggested that before “interviewing those who have had direct experience with the phenomenon, the researcher usually explores his or her own experiences, in part to examine dimensions of the experience and in part to become aware of personal prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions” (p. 25). Because of my direct connection to the experiences of the participants, it was particularly important that I control for bias. 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 (Johnson, 1997; Krefting, 1991). Throughout the study, I maintained a journal that provided a way to record and acknowledge biases that may have prohibited clarity of reporting.

Institutional Review Board

A proposal for this study was submitted to the University’s Institutional Review Board to ensure it included the elements required for informed consent and participant safety.

Informed Consent. Participants in the study were provided an informed consent document (Appendix D) that explained the purpose of the research, the efforts that would be made to ensure confidentiality, and the participants role in the research study. The informed consent document outlined the participants rights including the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time. The document was signed by the participant and the researcher and both were provided a copy prior to participation (Seidman, 2013).

Confidentiality. “Qualitative research takes place in homes and workplaces of participants. It also focuses on difficult-to-research issues or emotional issues not amenable to measurement or precise assessment” (Creswell, 2013, p. 106).

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 provides them a safe environment in which they could share their true experiences.

Reporting of Findings. There is no one way to report the findings of a qualitative study and the report is not separate from thinking or analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). This study is reported with the reader in mind and is intended to reflect the highest standards during data collection, analysis and reporting.

Data Analysis and Procedures

“Data analysis is one of the few aspects of doing qualitative research – perhaps the only one – in which there is a preferred way” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016 p. 197). Throughout data collection, I also analyzed data to ensure the data were not unfocused, repetitious, or overwhelming, which can result if data analysis is not ongoing (Creswell, 2013). Data in this study were derived from responses to the initial recruitment email, transcriptions of 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. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained the task a researcher undergoes to analyze their data, explaining

you can read about data analysis, even take a course in it, but it isn’t until you work with your own data in trying to answer your own research question that you really see how data analysis “works” in qualitative research (p. 201).

Creswell (2013) outlined the core elements of qualitative data analysis as coding the data (reducing the data into meaningful segments and assigning names for the segments), combining the codes into broader categories or themes, and displaying and making comparisons in the data graphs, tables and charts (p. 180). In an attempt to utilize procedures outlined by Creswell (2013) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016), I organized the data by examining and categorizing participant statements that were common, I read through all of the data to gain better idea of the general themes that were emerging as data collection continued, and I began coding the data through coding methods suggested by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014).

There are two stages of data coding. During the first, I assigned codes to chunks of data. During the second stage, I worked with the results of the data coded in the first cycle. Throughout the two cycles I, examined the data through the lenses of the following codes:

- Descriptive Coding: Used to identify ideas that were common across interviews
- Emotional Coding: used to identify times the participant showed greater feeling for an idea due to increase in voice volume, laughter or lengthy pauses
- Causation Coding: used to discern motives, processes, and the complexity of influences on the phenomena (Miles, et al., 2014 p. 74-79).

The codes created throughout data collection related to one another in coherent ways and were ultimately part of a unified structure (Miles, et al., 2014).

Design Issues

Qualitative research is assessed by looking at the trustworthiness of the study, which is done by looking at several factors, including the credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability of the research (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility

Credibility is a strength of qualitative research because of “extensive time spent in the field, the detailed thick description, and the closeness of the researcher to participants in the study all add to the value or accuracy of the study” (Creswell, 2014, p. 250). 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, I shared the research with participants to ensure I was reflecting their voice and not inserting my bias as a researcher.

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, I describe the participants experiences in rich, thick detail which will allow the experiences to be transferred to other populations, although it is important to note that the participants were enrolled in an educational doctoral degree and experiences may not be transferrable to those pursuing other types of doctoral degrees.

Confirmability

Confirmability is demonstrated by including the use of an audit trail, triangulation mentioned earlier in this section, 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 I maintained a journal that provided the chance to record my 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 I progressed in research and data collection, I sought feedback from critical friends including peers and my advisor. To ensure dependability, in the study I engaged in an audit trail, member checks, and bracketing. Lincoln and Guba (1985) outlined two reasons to leave an audit trail 1) to determine whether the data collection procedures were representative of the study and 2) to allow for examination of the results of the data collection. In addition to providing my critical friends with identity protected transcripts and coding procedure information, I also provided a copy of the memos and notes I collect to help in ensuring I am bracketing my bias.

Delimitations

The scope of the study was delimited to participants who completed the first stage of an educational doctorate degree but did not persist during the final stage of the program. Students were enrolled in a cohort program that consisted of coursework, comprehensive examinations and writing a dissertation. They were all working toward an Ed.D.. The study sought to understand if and how the student's 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 the decision to leave their doctoral program.

Limitations

This study is limited by looking at students pursuing an Ed.D. in a cohort setting. The findings from the study may not be transferrable to students in a residential Ph.D. program. Similarly, the study is not transferrable to other students enrolled in other degree programs outside of the cohort model.

The experiences of the participants may vary as may their motivations for seeking the degree are likely varied.

Summary

This chapter discussed the decision to conduct a phenomenological research study to determine if and how student's needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness were met or thwarted during their pursuit of an educational doctorate degree. The chapter described and provided rationale for the methodology of the study's design. Ethical considerations have been reviewed as have the delimitations and limitations of the study. The study was conducted with the highest attention to integrity.

CHAPTER 4

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

The purpose of this study was to understand reasons students do not complete an educational doctorate after they have completed the coursework and comprehensive examination stages of the program. 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 doctoral 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, were selected for a series of three interviews. Participants included four males and three females. This chapter presents profiles of each of the participants.

Composite Profile of Participants

Table 4.1 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.

Table 4.1

Participant Demographics

Name	Sex	Highest Degree Earned	Years of Post-Secondary Education	Discipline
Bob	M	MMA	10	Retired
Jim	M	MA	15	Financial Advising
Arlene	F	Ed.S.	16	Education 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

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

Bob attended a private Christian elementary school as well as a private Christian all boys high school. He was very involved in activities throughout school and is an accomplished musician. Education was valued in his home, both parents had degrees and his father had gone on to earn a Master's in his profession. Bob remembers having a lot of books in the home and that reading was very important. He shared that he read Tom Sawyer in first grade and is proud of that accomplishment. Bob attended a junior college for two years out of high school and then went on to a large state school to earn his bachelor's degree in music education. Following his college graduation, he taught in the private school system for six years. During the summer months, he worked on his Master's degree from the same university he had earned his undergraduate degree. While working on his Master's and teaching he was expanding his family and made the decision to leave the education profession to pursue a career in the insurance industry. He worked in the insurance industry until he retired and has since pursued a

career in various political areas. Bob continued to stay connected to his passion of music education by teaching classes at the institution he attended for the first two years of his college experience. He had been considering enrolling in a doctoral program but had not made a decision on what area he wanted to study. One day, following his retirement from the insurance industry, he 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 institution. He picked up a folder and was drawn to the program's emphasis on leadership.

I thought, well, this is all about leadership. It is educational leadership, but I am sure it would translate to all the things I am involved in that related to leadership and that was kind of...in fact one of the people who was in the program, a local school principal, said, "oh this isn't limited to education, this would be applicable to all kinds of forums" and I thought, well good, that sounds like something I'd like to do even more. I mean I would love to get a DMA (Doctor of Musical Arts) or a Ph.D. but this sounds more attuned to what I am doing. So, I applied and was accepted.

Bob completed the two years of coursework and the comprehensive exams.

Bob entered the insurance profession with the intention of providing a more secure salary for his family. He also set a goal of retiring at a young age. Retiring from the insurance industry did not indicate Bob was done with his career. Upon retiring, he was extremely active, teaching as an adjunct instructor and serving on a variety of community boards. He had always wanted to get a doctorate and recalled encouragement from his undergraduate advisor to pursue the advanced degree.

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.

Bob felt like he had a lot of autonomy during the coursework stage of the program, “Knowledge is socially constructed and we did a lot of constructing knowledge.”

Bob had mixed emotions regarding his feelings of autonomy during the dissertation stage of the program:

On one hand I felt pretty autonomous because he (my advisor) didn't contact me very often, although I didn't contact him either, however I felt that the advisor was pushing me to do a cookbook dissertation with his favorite statistical treatment.

Bob discussed feelings of competence during the dissertation stage:

I felt very competent during the coursework of the Ed.D. program. I enjoyed the readings and thought that we, the content overall, we were very good on the content.

Bob discusses feelings of autonomy during the dissertation stage:

The few times I did meet with my advisor, I was looking for someone to hold my hand a little bit. Maybe you aren't supposed to do that during a doctoral program, but since he wanted to change the design, I wanted a little bit of hand holding and encouragement. I would ask him questions and he would ask questions back, so I am not sure we communicated very well. I told someone he kind of reminds me of the Riddler, instead of giving me information and helping me through a few spots that were holding me back he would ask me more questions. It was almost like I was being examined again instead of suggesting, “here, try it this way.”

During the coursework stage of the doctoral program Bob felt a relatedness to his classmates.

Bob's 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."*

Bob recalled a class in which the professor was very condescending toward his group and indicates that was the time when dark clouds began gathering over the experience. The combination of the experience with the professor and frustration with his advisor were two factors that contributed to Bob's decision to discontinue work on his dissertation.

I wanted to get it (the dissertation) done so I started talking to my advisor about what I wanted to get done and it looked to me like a lot of his...he liked factor analysis. A lot of his advisees were using that technique. I thought, essentially, what he wants me to do is to do the literature review and then use the research design that everyone else is using. It makes it easier for him, I guess, but that wasn't what I wanted to do.

We had a quantitative class and of course he was the teacher of that. We did a lot of work where we split off into pairs and sat at the computer and used different statistical problems and it was after one of those classes...I can still remember, he was up at the podium and I told him what I wanted to do. He wanted to change it then and I remember, this was actually in the second year of the program, and he kind of threw me off the track already then. 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.

When I asked Bob if he could pinpoint a definitive time when he made the decision to walk away from the doctoral program he provided me with the following:

Yeah, the coup de grace for me, after providing very little in the way of inspiration or acting as if he were really interested in the topic or anything. After doing very little in the way of that...I would talk to him and he didn't really make any requirements particularly clear because as I said, he spoke in riddles. And then, we got either a satisfactory or unsatisfactory grade and he gave me an unsatisfactory grade and I just thought... wow, lack of clarity, lack of support, trying to change me all around and then give me an unsatisfactory and so...screw you pal. That was kind of my thought at the time. I didn't have an academic career where I needed, I wasn't a principal or wanted to be a principal and needed the degree. I just did this for my own enrichment and mental stimulation and all that good stuff. I was always interested in my dissertation topic and I really wanted to get into this and find something and do a study. It got more and more frustrating and I just finally said, you know what, this is a rather utilitarian view, this is nothing I need for my career and it is just starting to make me angry that he is treating me this way so I am just going to stop it. Now, in hindsight, what I should have done when I was angry like that, is that I should have talked to one of the other professors and expressed my honest feelings and said, "I need a change" because I really did want to finish this thing but he just...I think I got two of these unsatisfactory grades and I thought, I am

not going to do this. I don't have to and it angers me...I don't get those kinds of grades and it just irritated me.

Feelings of anger played a role in Bob's decision to discontinue work on his dissertation. When I asked Bob how he felt after he made the decision his answer indicated he still feels some anger toward the situation:

I felt like a great weight had been lifted off my shoulders. It was kind of interesting. I ended up emailing him and telling him I didn't think it was working and I wanted to withdraw from the program and he emailed me back and said, "well, you don't need to talk to me, you need to talk to the university." I thought, well this is just typical, this guy is kind of like, I am wasting his time talking to him. I remember one time, this is kind of an aside, I went up to his office to meet with him and he had someone in the office and so he just, they just stayed in the office and he visited with them and then visited with me and they just stayed in the office and I thought well, you know I thought this was my appointment. I thought that to myself, I just felt like I was a distraction to his day or a bother or something and he wasn't all that interested so...

Interviewer: So, when you said that you were going to discontinue the program, he in no way tried to talk you out of that he just...

No! He didn't say, "gee, I know you're frustrated, we can work this out." He didn't even talk to me, he emailed me back and said you need to do this through the University. So, I did feel a great weight had been lifted off of me. It was just grinding. He wasn't producing and he was saying I

wasn't producing so if I could have given him a grade I would have given him an Unsatisfactory also. In fact, I am giving him an Unsatisfactory...

Bob summarized the doctoral program experience with the following:

I still use, in the things I am doing and in everyday life, I still use the things I learned about leadership and reframing organizations, certainly about collaboration. I was just writing a letter to someone and I gave a quote from one of our textbooks. Obviously, I bought into all of it, I still practice it and believe in it. I'm frustrated the University isn't interested in my comments about coming back and finishing the degree.

Jim

Jim attended elementary, middle and high school in a rural school district in the Midwest. His high school had about 500 students. He graduated as the salutatorian and was very involved in extracurricular activities throughout his high school years. His parents advocated college as they had not attended, however three of his four grandparents had earned higher education degrees. His parents also understood the cost of college and explained to Jim and his siblings that they would not be able to afford to send all the children to college so they would need to earn academic scholarships to cover some of the expenses. *"That was really the focus of our high school career, to make sure we did what we had to do get scholarships so we could get college paid for."* Jim earned a full ride academic scholarship to a small state university about three hours from his home. Jim enjoyed math and wanted to be a coach, so he made the decision to major in education and earn a coaching endorsement. He graduated college in four years and taught high school for one year before enrolling in a Master's in administration program at a small university that offered a satellite cohort near his home. His motivation for pursuing a Master's degree was an increase in salary. Jim graduated with his Master's degree two years after enrolling. He was unimpressed with the program,

“graduate school, that experience, was about me checking a box off. I felt like the quality of the program was really substandard. I was really underwhelmed with the quality of the master’s program in all honesty.”

After graduating with his Master’s degree, Jim accepted a position as a high school Vice Principal. After a couple of years serving as an administrator he began considering the role of superintendent and began looking for a doctoral program. He was so underwhelmed with his Master’s program that he was more intentional about the doctorate program and decided on a program offered at the State University because it had a very good reputation. Before applying for the doctoral program, he took a year and a half of classes at various institutions so he would be eligible for the doctoral program.

Jim began working on his doctoral degree while serving as a high school principal. 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 made the decision to pursue the degree because he felt he was a successful administrator and knew he could be a successful superintendent.

Jim was struggling with feeling overwhelmed and overworked as he pursued his doctoral degree.

I can remember telling some of the guys I worked with, really close friends that I really wish I hadn’t taken on all of this because right now, right after I became principal, it was really a lot. I was really overworked and wasn’t giving enough time to my family. I felt like I was short changing my family a lot, especially in the summer when I spent a lot of time on campus. I remember, my wife and I talked about it and she kept saying you have to do this. You started it, now you have to finish it.

When Jim was asked what motivated him to get through that period in his life he said:

The encouragement of my wife just to finish it but more than anything I thought it was really valuable. I enjoyed the class time and I was getting a lot of perspective out of it. I think I am a better leader now because of that program. Two things, my wife's encouragement but second, I knew I was getting good stuff out of it.

Jim did not go into great detail regarding his feelings of autonomy but indicated he did feel like he had autonomy during that stage of the program.

Jim discussed his feelings of autonomy during the dissertation stage:

The one place where I feel like I didn't have control was when I changed advisors and the topic wasn't going to work anymore. We had decided this was going to be a topic and were working on it, then they (administration) said, "well this doesn't really fit for an Ed.D. Program." I felt bad for the new advisor because he took over and had to tell me this, but I don't really think the message came from him. I think the other people on the committee didn't think my topic should have started from the beginning, it shouldn't have been ok. So, I can say I don't fault the new advisor for telling me that, but when I couldn't really explore the topic I wanted to...it wasn't worth it.

Jim discussed his feelings of competence during the coursework stage of the program:

I did (feel competent), I took pride in it, I felt like I was doing a good job of understanding the material, participating in discussions, and completing the assignments. That was probably the only bit of reluctance I had about getting out of the dissertation is that I believe...I

know I could do it. It wasn't a lack of competence I don't believe. I felt like through the whole process I was in a good spot and it was a good fit for me.

Jim discussed his feelings of competence during the dissertation stage of the program:

The new job, the new career, I needed to put a lot of energy into starting this, so it was probably going to get more reward for time spent working on my new career than I was working on this dissertation. It just kind of became one of those deals where I had to make a decision, where was I going to spend my time. My main motivation for making a career change was having more time with my family. I was making sure I preserved that. So, the time I wasn't working, it didn't make sense for me to work on my dissertation when I really wasn't getting fed. 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 an experience, learning and trying to push myself a little bit.

Jim discussed feelings of relatedness during the coursework stage of the program:

I think this is probably really applicable in my situation because during the coursework the relatedness was really high. I could see it all pertained to leadership, I was working in education at that time and it all fit as far as helping me do my current job better.

Jim also commented on his feelings of relatedness toward his peers:

During the cohort time, I had another individual who, we rode together to class. It was about a 90-mile drive to class. We rode together each

day and we developed a really close friendship, and I would say that that is part of what kept me going to classes, especially the last semester when I wasn't in the career anymore. I was enjoying the learning but we were kind of in this together, and so I think that I would be remiss if I didn't say that that played some type of a role, having that relationship played some type of role in completing the coursework and then in the dissertation it was just me, I didn't have that part of the relationship with her, so there is probably is an impact, there is something to that also.

Jim discussed feelings of relatedness during the dissertation stage of the program:

Once we got to the dissertation stage and I changed careers, there really was no relatedness at all, in the dissertation study, in what I was currently doing in my career. I think that, 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.

As Jim continued to work on his doctoral degree and serve as a high school administrator he began to question his time away from his family and made the decision to leave education in pursuit of a new career opportunity. When I asked Jim why he made the decision, he pinpointed one experience that solidified the decision:

This is kind of a silly story, but it was the tipping point for me. I was gone all week at supervisions, gone every single night that week, the kids were in bed before I got home each night. Then Saturday my daughter brought me this bag of candy corn and there were only three

kernels of candy corn left in the bag. I said, "what did you do, eat the rest of it?" and she said, "Well, Daddy, I brought it home Monday and you weren't here" so it turns out what happened is that she wanted to give it to me but I wasn't there so she would eat a little each day. I came to the realization that if I didn't change some things my kids would be grown before I realized it. A financial planning firm had been trying to recruit me for about five years but I kept telling them, "no", but then once that happened I took the call and they were trying to open an office in my hometown. I've got a lot of flexibility and so the more we talked about it the more we decided it was probably the right thing for our family.

Jim made the decision to switch careers with one semester of coursework and comprehensive exams to be completed. He continued to take classes and completed the exams because he felt like it was important. He had really enjoyed the process and felt like the learning, the reading, and the exams were tying the experience together.

Jim 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 Ph.D. versus an Ed.D.

I just felt like at that point in time, I am getting more into the legalistic stuff and the technicalities and I don't really have time for that, so... that is why I thought it would be better, at that point...I had learned so much and the degree didn't really matter to me in this career and by finishing the dissertation I didn't really know that I was going to gain anything

other than the degree. And, to me, that didn't have as much value as the knowledge I gained in the course, so I guess the return wasn't worth the work at that point in time for me.

Jim discusses his feelings after making the decision to quit the program:

I think it was a combination of relief, to know that I have got some more time, but also there was a little sense of leaving something undone. I put a lot of time and effort and didn't see it quite through. In reflecting, I realize that I learned what I wanted to learn by going through the program. I gained a ton and while I didn't gain the letters, I didn't obtain the degree, I am not going to lose any sleep over that. It was the right decision for me at the time, because of the time I gained to spend with my kids and my family and to start this new career. If I could do it over again, would I love to finish the degree? Absolutely. But, I think I made the right decision as far as me and my time.

When Jim was asked to summarize the doctoral program experience he said:

I don't see my time in the coursework wasted, just because I didn't earn the degree. The cohort learning arrangement was really beneficial to me. It pushed me to consider things from a different perspective. The curriculum was more liberal than where I come from so it made me consider a more liberal perspective. But I am a better leader and have a better understanding of leadership than I had before I entered the program. There was growth, for me, and when I think about the growth, I don't know that finishing the dissertation would have increased that.

Arlene

Arlene moved to the Midwest from the east coast at the age of five. She attended a mid-size school district with a graduating class of approximately 400. Education was valued, but college wasn't necessarily an expectation. She loved school, with the exception of math. Arlene was involved in many clubs and activities. She went directly from high school to college into at a mid-sized State University. She chose the college due to its proximity to her home. She majored in communication disorders and earned a bachelor's degree. Upon graduation, she decided she wanted to work with children and returned to the same institution for three additional years to earn a second bachelor's in education. Arlene spent the final semester of her second bachelor's teaching in Wales. After graduating with her second bachelor's degree, she began teaching and took one year off school. She enrolled in a Master's program the following year at the same institution. Arlene chose that institution again due to proximity to home as well as program reputation. Arlene decided to pursue a Master's quickly after graduating with her bachelor's because the educational material was fresh in her mind and she didn't want to put it off and follow in the steps of some of her peers who said they wished they had done it earlier. As she was finishing her Master's in school administration, she was approached about a position as a principal within the district she was teaching. She interviewed for the position and was hired as an elementary school principal. After some encouragement from her district's superintendent, she began taking classes for a specialist certificate at the same institution she had earned her undergrad and master's degrees. She completed her specialist certificate and while taking classes her professor and advisor encouraged her to consider a doctoral program at a large midwestern university in the same state she had earned previous degrees. Arlene had heard a lot of positive things about the doctoral program and it was again close to her home. The program was set up into four cohorts in different sections of the state that met throughout the fall and spring semesters. During the summer, all cohorts were required to meet at the university for a one-month session of classes. Arlene found out she was expecting a child

and was due to deliver during the summer program. 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 chose to pursue a doctoral degree as personal goal and with encouragement from district superintendent.

This is something that I wanted for myself. I wasn't doing it for a promotion, I wasn't doing it to have the letters, I was doing this for myself, because it was something I wanted to complete. So that was a motivator for myself. I was interested in the work that I was doing. One day I thought maybe I might be as superintendent, but I was one who wanted to constantly educate myself and be stronger in the content area so I could support what I was doing in the schools. That was my motivation, to continue to learn and to bring it back to impact my teachers and my students.

Arlene discusses her feelings of autonomy during the coursework stage of the program:

We had some autonomy in the topics that were provided, we could choose how we wanted to go forward with them, but the coursework.

Arlene discusses her feelings of autonomy during the Dissertation Stage:

There was a big shift in the feelings of autonomy, none of us had started any work on our dissertation, the field had changed and we were on our own.

Arlene discusses feelings of competence during the coursework stage of the program:

I felt success, being a new mom the second semester, or second year, and being in the position of an administrator. I would say it was tough

because I was managing and juggling all over the place, but I would say that I felt pretty confident in what I was doing. There were times I would turn in assignments and I didn't feel as competent because I hadn't had the time to do what I knew I could do in that particular assignment, there were some when it was just like I got it done thank goodness I got it turned in.

Arlene discusses her feelings of competence during the dissertation stage of the program:

It was go and do it on your own. The structure of having the time in class and the supports would have been...I would have finished my dissertation, let's just say that. Because of everyday life and situations that come about, I did not feel that I had the competence to move forward. I scheduled meetings, I did things, but it was basically you either do it or you don't.

Arlene discusses feelings of relatedness during the coursework stage of the program:

There were a lot of times I questioned how this was going to be beneficial to me. I think the conversations we had around the coursework at the time was more relatable for me because I was saying, "OK, I am not dealing with this now, but I could" or we could bring things to the table and I could say, "based on what I have read, I am dealing with this situation, how has everyone else dealt with that?" and we would have those deeper conversations, but it just varied. It varied with the time of what was happening and it varied with everyone's daily life in education There were times when I was thinking, I don't think this

is valuable to me and other times I was like, "wait, I need more time to go deeper into this."

Arlene discusses feelings of relatedness during the dissertation stage of the program:

It was more of that "You're on your own" and the supports were not as there as they had been. Because even with your peers and classmates in the class, we were all over the place. So, it shifted slightly, there were several that didn't even think or talk about it for six months and that right there...we had been going for two full years, we only had a couple of weeks of a break from start to finish and then when you get into that lull of not having that responsibility, it shifts.

Arlene cited two reasons for her decision to leave the doctoral program. The first was frustration about the opportunities presented to other cohort locations that were not offered to her cohort.

For me personally, it was other cohorts within our program that were at different locations that were working on their dissertation their last year and we weren't. That was very difficult because we were basically focused on the coursework...all the coursework...and then you're on your own to go write your dissertation. We had scheduled times with our advisor but what they had and we didn't was they had a weekly opportunity to come together and they would talk about it, not saying they were writing their dissertation the entire time, but they were having conversation about, "this is chapter 1, this is what you're looking at, here are the things you need to be aware of, are you doing this correct, bring it and let's talk about it, you work on it on your time away

and then bring it in and we'll share with each other, we'll get feedback." They were getting all of that and we weren't. It was very, honestly, within our cohort, within the small number of us, it took multiple years...we didn't have anybody 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.

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.

My youngest child had a lot of medical issues and we were transitioning through that. I had moved to a new job, responsibilities had changed, and was dealing with the situation that a medical situation with my child. So, 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.

When Arlene made the decision to discontinue working on her dissertation she felt as though she had failed.

I felt awful. I felt like a failure. I'll be honest, I had worked that hard to do something and it was something I wanted to do for me, it wasn't anybody else saying you need to go and do this, it was my decision, and I wanted to complete it because I had put the work into it, but it just came down to where does the importance lie, does the degree take over the medical issues with your child?

When Arlene was asked to summarize the doctoral program experience:

I made valuable friendships with people in all areas of the state that I can count on consistently in different situations that I might be facing in education and I have gained some valuable insights into literature I would not have necessarily read and mindsets of how to approach different types of events, occurrences, situational aspects within my career based on that literature that I might not have thought of.

Louise

Louise attended a rural school district throughout her elementary, middle and high school years. Education was valued in her family and she recalled an early memory when the teacher explained that Louise's grades were not reflective of her potential. She had been "coasting." After that conversation, her parents started setting higher expectations. Louise was involved in a lot of activities throughout school and enjoyed the variety of clubs and organizations she was able to participate in due to the small size of the school district. Louise planned to pursue a college degree, in part because her family expected it from her. She earned a scholarship to a small private liberal arts school, but due to a mix-up in financial aid she enrolled in a community college close to home and attended for one year, pursuing a major in accounting. After one year at community college, she attended a large state university pursuing a degree in political science. She disliked the state college due to size and the fact that she was not sure what she wanted to do with her life, so at Easter she went home and did not return to school. She took time off of school to work and earn money and after a year and a half enrolled in the private college she had originally earned the scholarship to attend. She made the decision to pursue elementary education because she had always enjoyed working with children and she was interested in pursuing a career in coaching. She graduated with a degree in elementary education after three years, six years after graduating high school. She spent one year working as a substitute teacher after turning down a teaching position in a southern school district, she was hired as a full-time teacher the next year.

and spent eight years teaching before enrolling in a Masters in effective teaching at a private college in the Midwest. While taking classes toward her Master's degree, she encountered a professor who would ultimately change her life. The professor encouraged Louise to pursue a specialist licensure following the completion of her Master's degree. 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 remained at that school for an additional four years before accepting a superintendent position at a different district, where she remained for six years. 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 she had earned her Masters and specialist license. Louise began working on her Ed.D. in a relatively new program and endured some of the program's mistakes, like taking a course in two to three weeks, "It was brutal, and I would never recommend that to anybody." Despite the kinks, she enjoyed the program and completed the coursework and comprehensive exams.

Louise made the decision to pursue the doctoral degree at the encouragement of her professor and mentor as well as a financial incentive offered by her school district.

Louise had a personal motivation to complete the degree. She did not pursue the degree with hopes of career advancement or increased salary, merely because she knew she could and she would like to hear the title Doctor once in her life. "I'd like to be called Doctor once and then they can go back to calling me whatever name they usually call me."

Louise discusses her feelings of autonomy during the coursework stage:

No, but that is probably why I was more successful there, because I had deadlines that I had to meet. I worked that into my schedule, I know I have class here, or I know I have things to do and that became part of my daily (routine). I am the kind of person, I need deadlines. The

coursework was pretty cut and dry, this is what we're working on. I mean they give you an assignment and maybe you got a little autonomy in the fact that you were supposed to be doing this, which direction do you want to go this way or this way, but I felt like there wasn't a tremendous amount of freedom there, there were things your professors wanted to see.

Louise discusses her feelings of autonomy during the dissertation stage:

I need deadlines, and I think that is where the dissertation, I mean I didn't have classes with" OK, I have to have this done at this time and this done at that time", that might have been my downfall.

Louise discusses her feelings of competence during the coursework stage:

I got good grades, passing grades in everything, I do feel like I was competent. I passed all the coursework and I passed the comps, I feel like I was competent in that.

Louise discusses her feelings of competence during the dissertation stage:

I felt like they had controlled so much and then all of a sudden it was like, "Ok, go be free." I think I could have used a little more guidance, but it was kind of my fault because I didn't ask as much. I felt like maybe they thought I should know this because other people seemed to be doing ok and it was like well, did I miss a step or something through there. I felt it was like controlled, controlled, controlled, and then all of a sudden," OK, you're free." Maybe something in the middle would have helped someone like me.

Louise discusses her feelings of relatedness during the coursework stage:

I felt like there was a disconnect. If you are in the academic world there is a lot more relevance than, and when I say that I mean the post-secondary, if you did that versus where I am in the K-12 setting especially a small setting, I don't have that many people under me, I wear quite a few hats. Some of the stuff we were dealing with, I was like, "you're kidding me" where is the part where you're dealing with some of the stuff I am dealing with like how I handle my budget or bus routes and all those different things? That was one part of it and I don't know that I felt it related very well to what I did all day every day. I did feel related to my cohort because most of them were in the same type of setting I was in.

Louise discusses her feelings of relatedness during the dissertation stage:

You are on your own in the dissertation...when you were in a cohort people you could ask questions like "Hey when you were working on this, did you find this?" sometimes we were actually working in pairs or groups, depending on what the assignment was, but then when you move to the dissertation you are on your own. When you hit a stumbling block, who do you go to? Because nobody else has the same topic as you and your dissertation, so you are really kind of an island.

Louise made the decision to discontinue work toward her doctoral degree due to health issues and increased responsibility for her mother. She had to make the decision between her job, taking care of her ailing mother or her dissertation:

Something had to give and that (the dissertation) was it. I had to have my job because I had to have my benefits, I had to have the money to

pay and then taking care of my mom.... If it had just been, when it was just my health, I was still kind of plugging along. But then with my mom's situation on top of it I was like, I can't do this. That's really why I didn't complete it, I didn't have it in me at the time, something had to give and that was it.

Louise discusses her feelings after making the decision to quit the program:

Disappointed in myself, actually, that I didn't get it finished, but like I said, I was battling health issues and I felt lousy anyway, but, disappointed I guess that I didn't get it...I always did it for myself, I didn't do it to climb the ladder, I wasn't viewing a bigger school or a bigger job, or anything, I was doing it for self-betterment. So, I was disappointed in myself that I didn't get it completed. And, I always thought that well, maybe I'll go back, but now I am getting closer to retirement, and I could still do it because it would be for me, but then it is like, OK, what would you do with it other than just to say "I completed it" I always said before, once I completed it they could call me Dr. once and then I would never have to hear it again.

When Louise was asked to summarize the doctoral program experience:

I think it was very worthwhile, I would do it again. I wish things had been different and I had completed it, but it was very hard. It should be hard, if it wasn't everyone would do it. Having Ed.D. after your name wouldn't be as impressive. It is a lot of hard work, being able to set aside the time and rearrange your life until you get it done. I think the program was very good. The program was personal, the groups were

small and you couldn't slide by on anything. So, in the end, it was a worthwhile experience and even though I didn't complete, I passed the coursework and 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 grew up and attended school in a rural Midwest community. She had a variety of educational influences throughout life. Her great grandmother taught in a one-room school, her great aunt was her principal and for a period of time she had her mother as a teacher. She shared stories of spending time in the summer helping her mom organize library books and hanging out with friends whose parents were also teachers in the community. She was a good student and was very active in athletics activities and music. College was expected but never demanded and the only restriction set on her future education was from her father who would not let her apply to a nearby private school for fear she would teach abroad and not return to the United States. She earned her Bachelor's degree from a state university and made a decision not to pursue athletics in college. She started as a pre-med major with intentions of going into veterinary school and eventually replacing her father in the family business, but after reflection decided she didn't want the lifestyle required to be a successful veterinarian.

I wanted a family and there were things I wanted to do in life and as I looked back I thought "Gosh, there were a lot of things Dad couldn't do or didn't get to do" because you're committed because the phone rings and you don't get to choose when you have a calving case or...who knows. So, I said "I don't want to commit to that lifestyle."

Tallie decided to major in art education. She considered science education but didn't want to teach a core class that most students do not typically enjoy. She earned a minor in coaching and athletic

training and graduated in four years. After graduating she taught high school art for a number of years and earned a Master's in secondary education from a private liberal arts college. When I asked about the motivation for pursuing a Master's degree she attributed it to a desire to increase her salary and provide for her children and their interests. Tallie continued to teach high school art and worked under a principal who wasn't very organized. While venting to a coworker after a frustrating faculty meeting, she began considering the coworkers encouragement to pursue an administrative degree. She made the decision to enroll in an administrative program at a private liberal arts college, the same school she would attend to work towards a doctoral degree. During her time in the administrative program, she accepted a position teaching at a different district and this time worked for a principal who had earned an alternative administrator license.

There were some frustrations with that. The high school staff wasn't really happy because never being in the classroom there were just things he (the principal) could not wrap his head around.

Tallie became his assistant principal and eventually increased responsibility including athletic director, director of special education and started an at-risk school. The principal moved to a different district and not long after, contacted Tallie to ask her if she would join him as an administrator in the district. She accepted and also began working on her doctoral degree at a private liberal arts college. Her decision to begin working on a doctoral degree was not an easy one. She consulted her father, who encouraged her, but she struggled to continue with additional school after she had already spent a significant number of years taking courses for her Master's and administrative license. She ultimately decided to submit an application with the thought that she could always change her mind. Once accepted she 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 was motivated to continue her education because she loved learning. She appreciated the coursework and felt they were providing her with valuable information that was being directly translated into her career.

Tallie discusses her feelings of autonomy during the coursework stage:

I really did (feel like I had autonomy), I think if you look at it from the perspective of the coursework and the content and working with (the institution) and the classwork on the academic end, absolutely. There are structures in place, it is organized, it is linear. Because it is a small cohort group, we know each other, we know the staff, there is a support network, you can access it at any time, but you also have the freedom to make choices, if you don't want to call up classmates and talk about the assignment you don't have to. There were online chats, there were a lot of choices you could pick from. If you think of autonomy in terms of responsibility outside of that, I would say it is mixed, did I have freedom from outside responsibility, no...there are some things you don't get to say, guess what I am not in the mood, I don't want to be a parent today.

Tallie discusses her feelings of autonomy during the dissertation stage:

What frustrated me, was not necessarily the piece about autonomy, what frustrated me...was that when we started talking about the dissertation process, it is a new process, it is a process that I know I wasn't as familiar with, most of my colleagues weren't. There was an assumption that you knew how to do it. I am a person, I like a visual, I like an example, I want to know "what is the organizational structure, what do I need to include, how do I build this thing?." For me, there

were a lot of gaps in that. For some of my, the people I was in class with, they were like, "No problem", they jumped right in, but their style of functioning, their personality was different. I want to be organized, I want to have everything in place, I want to know exactly what I need to do, I want to...I want it to be precise and I want to use my time well. I don't want to have a bunch of false starts and have to be like, "oh shoot, I did that wrong, I guess I will have to rewrite that 40 pages" ...so for me the structure was a problem.

Tallie discusses her feelings of competence during the coursework stage:

Absolutely...but I enjoy that kind of thing. I enjoy academia, I enjoy questioning and exploring. So, for me, the classroom is someplace I have always like to be. For me, to be confident, I need to know exactly what the expectation is.

Tallie discusses her feelings of competence during the dissertation stage:

When you move into a writing phase and the style of writing is very new for me, to not have the structure, to not have the guidance, to not have the feedback was very difficult. There was never a discussion of "what does this candidate need, how much support is it going to take, what is their level of confidence with the actual physical process of writing." That never came up.

Tallie discusses her feelings of relatedness during the coursework stage:

If you are thinking in terms of the coursework to professional practice it was tight, it was right on.

Tallie discusses her feelings of relatedness during the dissertation stage:

If you are thinking in terms of relatedness and the dissertation process, it really wasn't. When we walked through the quantitative coursework, the focus was on the mathematical side of it, how do I analyze the data? How do I process the data numerically? There wasn't a lot of conversation about how I identify a solid dissertation topic, how do I determine whether I want to do a qualitative, quantitative or mixed method. There wasn't a lot of conversation about that.

Tallie attributes 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.

Professor X said, "you have to start writing, you have to do this, just pick a topic, this is for practice." Ok, so, I pick a topic thinking this is for practice and I'm thinking, that's not bad, it gives me a chance to take some time to think about what I really want to do. Professor X retired and was never replaced, so the other advisor was on her own, I don't know really where the whole thing broke down, but it was like seriously, this is not a topic I would ever pursue. It was of interest to me but it would never impact anyone. I wasn't committed to doing it, to be honest. And the new advisor didn't realize we had been told to pick something and write for the practice and process. She is thinking I am committed to this and I was like, "hell no I'm not." It was one of those things that got easier to say, "you know what, I've got responsibility

with mom, I've got stuff going on, I'll get to it." That is where it really got put on the backburner. It was, I am not in love with this topic, I really would like to move in a new direction. I am not passionate. At that point, my Mom had Parkinson's and was needing a lot of care and a lot of help. We had moved her to assisted living and I became responsible for her finances, I took care of all her appointments. It reverses roles and you become the parent. Between having the two children in college and taking care of Mom and all the other stuff that went with it, I just said, "It can wait, the dissertation has to wait." That is where I left it, that is where I walked away.

Tallie still hopes to finish her doctoral program but acknowledges that she would have to retake some of the courses and it would be an expensive undertaking. The institution she attended requires students to maintain a one credit enrollment until they complete the dissertation. Tallie did not maintain the one credit and here is what she said when I asked her about the decision to stop enrolling:

At that point, right at that point, I just had to say, "you know what, I have to be honest with myself, I am spending money, it is silly, I am not making progress, just stop writing the check."

When I asked how she felt about that decision she said:

It was a mixed blessing. Part of it was, you know what, that is a good decision financially because I am not spending money foolishly. Part of me was like, wow I am going to let this go, I am going to put my personal goal on hold, it was that final kind of...this is it, you really are putting it on hold. So, it was definitely mixed, it was a mixed decision.

When Tallie was asked to summarize the doctoral program experience:

I loved it, I enjoyed every minute of it. There was the overt learning, the academic piece, but there were also other huge benefits. You were making connections and building a network of people you can rely on professionally and you can connect with and engage with around your profession. You also had the opportunity to step outside of what you do every day and become a student again. You learn a lot about yourself. You learn time management and you prioritize your challenges and tasks differently. There was a lot of self-learning

Heaton

Heaton attended a rural school district throughout elementary and middle school and the first semester of his freshman year of high school. Family changes brought about a move to another rural district for his second semester of ninth grade and then to a large school district for his first semester of tenth grade. He transferred back to the smaller school district for the second semester of his sophomore year and remained at that school until he graduated high school. College was an expectation in his family and Heaton recalled a time when his grades were reflecting his desire to spend more time on social relationships than academics. His father, a marathon runner, put Heaton's report card in his running log book and told Heaton he was going to keep it there, Heaton says "it was like rock bottom and it needed to be better than that." He graduated high school and went to a large state university. He began pursuing a major in biology but decided to pursue a degree in elementary education after the first year. He enjoyed working with early elementary students and completed his student teaching in a first-grade classroom in Texas. He remembered the excitement around leaving his home state and having an opportunity to try something away from home. Following graduation, he returned to his home state and struggled to find a teaching job. He worked in retail sales for a period of

time, but when they offered to move him to another state, he declined and left to substitute teach in the district he would work in for a large portion of his educational career.

After teaching for four years, a colleague encouraged Heaton to pursue a Master's in administration from a state university that was offering a cohort class in Heaton's town. He decided to apply and quickly realized administration was something he wanted to do. He graduated with his Master's degree in two years and shortly after was hired as an elementary administrator in the same district. Heaton continued to work as an elementary principal for seven years before a colleague encouraged him to pursue a specialist degree from a private institution in the state. He said, "I hadn't thought a lot about that, but someone gives you a nudge and...Ok, that is a good idea." He completed the specialist program and began taking on district responsibilities in addition to his role as principal. Heaton recalls thinking there was one more step for his personal education and started considering the doctoral program. He had a goal of serving the 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 began pursuing the doctoral degree with hopes of eventually stepping into the role of superintendent of the school district he had devoted his career to serving.

Part of Heaton's motivation to enroll in and complete the coursework and exam portion of the doctoral degree stemmed from a competitive relationship he had with one of his district colleagues.

We ended up having a really competitive professional relationship as colleagues and I remember wanting to get a jump start on my doctoral program to get ahead of him. We both had that specialist degree and aspired to be superintendents and we both wanted to be superintendent of the school district in which we were working, so I think it was

somewhat out of competitiveness that I jumped right in. (I) got out of the specialist and jumped right into the doctoral program to get ahead of him...

Heaton discusses his feelings of autonomy during the coursework stage:

When I think about this concept in the phases of coursework versus writing the dissertation, in my opinion, you definitely had a lot less autonomy in the coursework phases. The courses, the two years of courses, your life was, you take these two classes this term and these two the next and the path was already determined for you, the timelines...and the expectations and the assignment. You had autonomy in choices of topics of what you might write about or present about in terms of assignments. When I think about how I feel too overwhelmed and I cannot balance the job and the family...somehow, I did that and I think it was because I put those weekends on my calendar, they were protected and nothing else was going to interfere, you couldn't miss class or you would fail the course and papers were due at deadlines and you just had to get it done.

Heaton discusses his feelings of autonomy during the dissertation stage:

Everything else becomes more urgent when you don't have deadlines. I needed that, I needed that structure, I needed less autonomy and then you get to the writing phase and you are your own boss and it is on your timeline. That is how my experience has been, there hasn't been that..."I'm expecting this" and when it doesn't come, the follow up... "do you need follow up or support or questions" it has just been one way, "I need

help” versus...so I could go for months or even a whole year without hearing from my advisor unless I initiated any communication.

Heaton discusses his feelings of competence during the coursework stage:

Yeah, I never felt insecure about that I could do the work or get the degree or get a good grade. I had been a successful administrative leader and educational leader...so yeah.

Heaton discusses his feelings of competence during the dissertation stage:

I guess, yeah, a little less confident. I am the only one in my family who has gotten this far in advanced education. I didn't really understand what the process was like...so that was kind of helpful toward the end... I didn't really know....we talked about the dissertation...but not really, what does it mean, what are all the steps until you get to the end and then it is like, "well, these are the five chapters and when you get to the end you've got to defend it" you know what I mean, "You've got to go to IRB" and that was helpful to me, I need to see the steps and hurdles, or milestones, or whatever they are. I didn't understand that when I was first applying and starting in the program about how it all worked because none of my family had been through that process, so I would say maybe I felt less competent in that phase because I hadn't experienced and didn't know the whole path....

Heaton discusses his feelings of relatedness during the coursework stage:

In all my learning I felt like it was applicable. It made me a better school admin or a better school leader, so I definitely saw relatedness. It wasn't like it wasn't connected at all. One because I was able to

complete those degrees and have that learning I was able to achieve some of my professional goals or positions I had aspired to. I also felt like even though I don't have the doc, need the doc to be in the job I am in, the things I learned, especially about qualitative and quantitative research helps me be a better consumer of research I encounter in my job. So yeah, I would definitely say I feel that relatedness as far as the content and the learning experience and application to my job.

Heaton discusses his feelings of relatedness during the dissertation stage, specifically how he struggled to relate to his dissertation topic:

I talked to my committee chair about a year ago he suggested switching to a quantitative style because it is easier and I would get done quicker, or if it helps to aspire to a different job maybe I should do something more like literacy instruction, something that would be good on a resume or more applicable. I thought about that, just getting it done, and then I went back to...it is hard to put the time into it and I want it to be something I really care about, so I didn't want to switch to make it easier or to be a topic I wasn't really that interested in, it would be for someone else's purpose.

As Heaton continued his education, additional opportunities presented themselves.

Part of my motivation of completing those degrees was aspiring for more and more opportunities for leadership, with each degree it opened up new doors for me professionally...and they paid off, I finished my Master's degree and shortly after got a principal job...by having the specialist degree it opened up opportunities for district leadership and

even now....so each time I completed degrees it opened up new opportunities for me professionally so it was paying off...

While Heaton was working on his dissertation the superintendent position opened and he was hired as the interim superintendent for thirteen months. The school board ultimately hired a different person to fill the role and Heaton accepted a superintendent position in a state across the country. He attributes the fact that he hasn't finished the dissertation to the time commitment his job requires and the fact that he hasn't needed the degree in order to get the job to which he aspired.

Heaton does not put himself in the category of people who have quit the program. He has 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.

When Heaton was asked to summarize the doctoral program experience:

I have such a high value of education, I love school, so I have no regrets. I am a better leader, thinker, better with relationships, understanding people, perspectives of people and education. It has been engrained in me, the value of education. Without the advanced degrees I did obtain, I wouldn't be in the position I am in now. I am appreciative and want to have that end terminal degree. In many ways I don't need it to do my position well, but I've never had something I started and didn't finish, so it is more about perseverance. It is more personal for me to get it done than to do it for others or for a title. What I learned the most is this is a

more a feat of perseverance, strength and grit than that you are the expert of something.

Wilfred

Wilfred grew up in a rural area and graduated high school in a class of 32 students. He was very active in school and participated in a variety of extracurricular activities. He enjoyed the social aspect of school and says that is why he went each day. "I didn't mind school, I didn't mind the work, but it wasn't what I went to school for each day." Education was valued in his family. His mother was the first in her family to attend college. His father had to leave college to fight in the Korean war and never completed his degree, however he later became a member and then president of the school board. College was an expectation for Wilfred and his three siblings and all went on to pursue higher education. After graduation, Wilfred attended a small private school in the Midwest for one year. He had three siblings attending a state school in a different state, but also the Midwest and after the first year, he decided to transfer to the more affordable option with his siblings. Wilfred graduated in five years with a Bachelor's degree in social sciences and an educational degree. Wilfred accepted a teaching position at a small school outside Kansas City and spent six years teaching and coaching in the school district. He left the district for a different small district in Iowa and spent seven years teaching and coaching while working on his Master's degree in education administration. Once Wilfred graduated with his Master's he decided to test the waters and start applying for administrative positions. He thought, "well, an interview here or there wouldn't hurt me and when I am ready to take that next step I will be ready." He was offered the first position for which he applied and decided to accept the offer and move his family to a new district. He was hired as a vice principal and athletic director. The following year the principal left and Wilfred accepted his position. He would serve as principal and athletic director for the next six years. While serving as an administrator he began working on his superintendent's license at a private university in the Midwest. He took classes on the weekend for two years and graduated with his

superintendent's license when he decided to test the waters again and apply for a few positions, hoping to have some practice interviews before he accepted a position. Again, Wilfred was offered the first position he applied for and accepted a position as the superintendent of a small rural school district. While serving as superintendent, he made the decision to pursue his doctoral degree.

Wilfred made the decision to pursue the 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 doors to teaching at a higher education institution or an Area Education Agency.

I had two kids who were in elementary and I thought, if I can get in before they get to middle and high school I can get this thing done. I don't mind writing, I don't mind reading, I don't mind research, all the educational stuff is good, is fun, I don't have a problem with that. It just always came back to time. In 2008 I thought well, let me start the program, so I took the GRE and got into the program. I didn't find the work all that difficult, I found it interesting and enlightening. I enjoyed it, the systems classes, the finance classes, leadership classes and philosophy classes, all of that was good. I finished the actual program in 2010.

Wilfred discusses his feelings of autonomy during the coursework stage:

I believe I did. I felt like I had the autonomy to do the program. One, I would say my wife and kids were on board. My kids were not extremely busy with school and extracurricular activities. I knew they would be in a couple of years. At that time, I thought I could get this thing rolling and get it done and I didn't feel like I had any other issues. My professor and advisor gave me a thumbs up and a pat on the back and said, you

bet let's get this thing done and get this thing rolling." I had support of him and my administration and I felt excited and ready to go.

Wilfred discusses his feelings of autonomy during the dissertation stage:

The only down side is...I started feeling a few constraints when, like I mentioned earlier, do I want to step out of where I am at right now, do I want to look into another district or do I want a few years. I put myself and my dissertation on the back burner because...well, let's make the move and I'll take 6 months, wait and then get started in another six months. But sometime during my first year in the new job I had planned on getting started.

Wilfred discusses his feelings of competence during the coursework stage:

All the coursework that I had taken, all the things I had done through my Masters, Specialist, and Doctoral program, there was nothing that was too challenging. It was challenging but it was nothing where I thought, "wow I am completely lost and incapable of doing this." I don't mind writing, I don't mind doing papers. Going through my master's program I wrote a lot of papers, so as far as the writing portion of it and doing the research, that wasn't a problem in fact I always kind of enjoyed that. Between the research and between all the other things necessary to get a dissertation done, nothing scared me nothing was a situation where, "Gosh this is too overwhelming"

Wilfred discusses his feelings of competence during the dissertation stage:

No, (feelings of competence did not change) I don't believe so. I actually started the process and each and every time I would put something on

the back burner, something within my life or something within the community. Every single time I tried to get things back up and running and put it on the front burner, things came along. And, there are probably things I could have said no to, and I didn't. Every single time I was like, "alright I am going to dedicate the next 6-8 months to get some things done and start collecting more information." It was like time after time things happened professionally and personal things too, but it was "alright this is a little more important right now", whether it be the job or family, it was more important right now and the dissertation will be there next month or in 6 months.

Wilfred felt a strong connection with his advisor during the coursework stage of the doctoral program. He also related well to his peers and the coursework.

Wilfred discusses his feelings of relatedness during the dissertation stage:

When I finished my classwork, my advisor was retiring and he passed me onto a new advisor. I am thinking, great, no problem. I remember meeting her for the first time and we got along quite well. In fact, the times that I met with her and the times that I sat down with her, she even allowed me to enter a class for the summer just to get my feet wet again and get back and get this dissertation rolling again. She did, probably, all she could but I guess there was just...the relationship I had with my previous advisor wasn't the same, things were different.

Wilfred completed the coursework in 2010 when a superintendent position in a larger district opened and he made the decision to submit an application. He wasn't given an interview and says, "I remember thinking that was fine, I was happy in my current position. I would go ahead and finish up the

dissertation in the next two and I should be good to go.” The district in which he applied wasn’t happy with any of the candidates so they called Wilfred to see if he was still interested in doing an interview. He did and was hired. The decision was tough: “Good professional advancement and financially it was a good advancement. My wife and I thought, well our sons are in middle school, if we are going to move we don’t want to move them in high school, let’s go ahead and move them now.” Wilfred quickly realized the time commitment at the larger district was much greater than the district he left and his dissertation was easily put on the back burner.

Every summer, all of these other things seem to have taken precedence or priority over completing the dissertation. I don’t think I am wrong in saying this, I would have loved to have finished the doctorate for personal reasons, but one way or another, when it came push to shove I was in a situation where family, kids, (and) wife came first and my own personal needs would come at the bottom. I think time is really what has strangled me when it comes to not getting it done and completed.

Wilfred discusses his feelings after making the decision to quit the program:

Depressed, down, I don’t know that there is anything that I have attempted to go out and do that I did not do. I set goals for myself, whether it be through younger days in high school, college, playing sports in college, getting certain degrees, jobs and being successful, I can’t say that there is anything I can’t accomplish once I set my mind to it. This is very much something I wanted to get done and get completed and so I just had to come to the realization that everything I was attempting to do and trying to get done, something has to give. 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.

When Wilfred was asked to summarize the doctoral program experience:

I would say it was bittersweet, rewarding, a lot of times information, knowledge and learning is still the focus, not getting the piece of paper or something that you put on your head or around your neck. What you learn along the way, how does that impact your organization, school district, kids, and people. If you are able to step back and say, "All the things I learned impacted the district and the students" then it is worth it. It would have been nice to get that final sheet of paper but ultimately, the process of being a lifelong learner is extremely important and when I step out of this profession and move to another profession I will continue to learn and challenge myself.

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.

The participants discussed their various feelings regarding how their needs of autonomy, relatedness and competence were met during the two stages of the doctoral program. Their experiences led to three themes, passion for learning led to the decision to pursue the degree, motivation was built during the first stage of the program, and changes in feelings of autonomy and relatedness led participants to rethink priorities and personal goals. These themes, along with subthemes will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to understand reasons for attrition in students pursuing a doctoral degree in a 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), three themes emerged in answer to the research question: *What are the experiences of doctoral students who leave their programs during the dissertation stage and decide not to finish the degree requirements?* And the sub questions: *How did students feel their needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence were met during the first stage of the program, and How did students perceive their needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence were met during the final stage of the program?*

The themes and subthemes that emerged from the data analysis provide a framework for understanding why students made the decision to discontinue their doctoral studies as well as if and how their needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness were met. Table 5.1 provides a summary of the themes found in this study.

Table 5.1

Themes & Subthemes

Theme #1 Passion for learning led participants to pursue the degree

- Family history of educators
- Love of learning

Theme #2: Motivation was built during the first stage of the program

- Autonomy needs were met and competence was strong
- Relatedness needs were met and competence was strong

Theme #3: Changes in feeling of autonomy and relatedness caused participants to rethink priorities and personal goals

- Changes in autonomy
 - Changes in relatedness
 - Changes in personal goals
-

Theme #1: Passion For Learning Led Participants to Pursue the Degree

Every participant in the study commented on a passion for learning. When asked about their educational experiences in secondary school, undergraduate school and all additional degrees they had pursued they indicated they always felt comfortable with their academic abilities and genuinely enjoyed going to school. All of the participants enjoyed school for the academic as well as social aspects. Each of the participants was active in extracurricular activities that included athletics as well as the arts. For many, this love of learning and school is what led them to pursue an initial degree in education.

Tallie:

I love music, I love art, I loved school, I loved science, I loved the lab, I loved biology, I loved the learning piece and figuring things out.

Jim:

I really enjoyed the learning, I really just had a drive to understand better the way things worked and then make connections, I didn't really have a specific subject, I loved learning and I also enjoyed the social aspect of school as well.

Bob:

I always enjoyed reading, I enjoyed all the organizations I belonged to. I sang in the Catholic school mass and I certainly enjoyed that.

Louise:

I enjoyed the activities in school. I was involved in a lot of things, not only sports, but also the fine arts and the social areas.

Arlene:

I loved school. I tried really hard. I was active in school so I hated to miss. I was involved in different clubs and activities so it was never a thing that I did not want to be involved in school.

Heaton:

I always liked to learn and it came easy to me, I didn't have to struggle to learn. I had many years in a row where I had perfect attendance awards at school. I have always liked to learn and like school, that is probably why I have worked in schools.

Wilfred:

For me, school was about the social aspects, the athletics and the extracurriculars. I didn't mind school, I didn't mind the work, but it wasn't what I went to school for every day. I sang in the choir, I played trumpet, I participated in every sport available.

Family History of Educators

The participants were asked if education was valued in their families and all of them indicated it was. In addition, many of them explained that they had family members who had been educators. Tallie had a great-grandmother who taught in a one-room school house, a great aunt who served as her principal and a mother who served as the school librarian. She fondly remembered spending her summers in the school, helping her mom.

My great-great grandmother taught. I have her school bell. The building she taught in, it is literally two blocks from my house. My grandmother taught, both my grandmothers taught. I have several aunts who are Ph.D.'s. Education has been the career choice for many generations. Literally from the time I was two, there were three of us,

two of my best friends also had parents that taught at the high school. Literally we grew up in the building. In the summer, I would go over with mom when the books came in. I got to help unpack them, paste pockets, this was in the time libraries were very labor intensive. I learned the alphabet doing file cards. It was just the way you grew up. My friend's dad was the PE teacher, so we would go down and organize the football equipment or we would take basketballs and play basketball in the gym. For me, that was my playground (Tallie).

Bob also discussed his experience and exposure to education as his mom was an English teacher. He commented on the value of reading in the home and remembered reading Tom Sawyer as a first grade. Although Wilfred's father was not a teacher, he served the school board as a member and the president. Heaton's brother in law was a teacher and motivated Heaton to pursue the degree. Arlene's mom had worked with the special Olympics for many years and Arlene remembered helping out and having a passion for working with children with disabilities.

Love of Learning

While many of the participants admitted they began to pursue higher educational degrees because they wanted to move up the pay scale or open doors to more opportunities, the decision to begin a doctoral program was due to a love of learning and the desire to increase their knowledge. The decision also stemmed from encouragement from peers, mentors, and family. None of the participants set out at the beginning of their educational career anticipating they would eventually achieve a doctoral degree. For many of them, the opportunity presented itself and due to their comfort in the classroom and their desire to increase their knowledge, they took advantage of the opportunity.

Wilfred:

When I finished my specialist degree, I thought, well, I've gone all this way and I am still young enough. I asked a few people what they did for their doctorate...It was always a personal goal, knowing that I could do this and that it would open doors down the road.

Louise:

I happened to pick up an elective class while getting my Master's degree and the instructor changed my life. She talked to several us, trying to get us into administration. I remember asking her if she thought this was something I could do and she said I could.

Heaton:

I hadn't thought a lot about it, but when someone gives you a nudge you think, OK, that is a good idea.

Arlene:

My superintendent had finished her specialist program and recommended I start a specialist program. I started take classes here and there, not pressuring myself. In that process one of our professors and an advisor at the time said I would really benefit from the program. He suggested I consider looking into it and the next semester he asked again. When it was coming close to the time to start another cohort they offered an informational meeting and several of my education buddies said they were going to do it. So, that kind of stemmed us to the direction and get started in the process.

Bob:

I retired at the end of 2001 and I thought, you know, I have always wanted to get a doctorate, in fact one of my undergraduate advisors said I ought to think about getting a doctorate. One day I was headed to teach my adjunct class and they had a display of folders on the way to my classroom. The folders were about this Ed.D. program and I thought, well, this is all about leadership. It is educational leadership, but I am sure it would translate to all the things I am involved in that relate to leadership and that was kind of it. One of the people who was in the program told me "oh this isn't limited to education, this would be applicable to all kinds of forums." I thought, well, that sounds like something I'd like to do.

Tallie:

At the end of my specialist program, I was taking class with Pete and he told us they were starting a new doctoral cohort. We sat and talked with a couple of people in class and Pete looked at me and said, "are you going to do it?" I told him, "Gosh, I don't know, let me finish this degree." I hadn't even thought about it. I went home and kicked it around. I talked to my dad about it and he said, "why don't you?" The night of the last class Pete had the application and told me I needed to get started because class would start in August. I figured I could turn my application in and I could always change my mind. But, I knew if I was going to do it I was going to do it.

Jim:

I really had no plans to get into administration, but there was an opening and I decided to take the opportunity. The high school principal I was teaching under was moving to a different school and asked me to come along and be the assistant principal. After a couple of years, I thought I was pretty good at it and I felt like I had the potential to be a superintendent. In order to do that I needed a specialist or a doctorate. I was more intentional about getting this degree and chose the Ed.D. program at Midwestern University because I really wanted to have a degree from there.

Theme #2: Motivation was built during the first stage of the program

Within Self Determination Theory are a variety of mini-theories.

Cognitive Evaluation Theory concerns intrinsic motivation, motivation that is based on the satisfactions of behaving “for its own sake.”

Cognitive Evaluation Theory specifically addresses the effects of social contexts on intrinsic motivation, or how factors such as rewards, interpersonal controls, and ego-involvements impact intrinsic motivation and interest. Cognitive Evaluation Theory highlights the critical roles played by competence and autonomy supports in fostering intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Participants discussed these motivators fluidly, indicating they were motivated to complete the program for external reasons, increase in salary, additional career opportunities, and to make family proud. The timeline and expectations of the first stage of the program, which were external were perceived as rigid and left the participants with very little autonomy. The lack of autonomy provided many of them with a feeling of academic competence as well as the ability to prioritize the

responsibilities of classwork without encountering strong feelings of guilt at the items they moved lower on the priority list (family, career responsibilities, community involvement). These internal feelings were key in helping participants continue through the coursework.

Relationships with advisors and peers were an external influence that motivated participants to remain in the coursework. In addition, participants discussed the relation they felt to the coursework and the applicability of what they were learning to their everyday life.

Autonomy Needs Were Met Which Led to Increased Competence

Self Determination Theory defines autonomy as “freedom from control or influence” (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Participants were asked to describe their feelings of autonomy during the coursework stage of the doctoral program. Participants indicated a range of feelings around the level of autonomy they experienced during the coursework stage of the program. See Figure 1 in Appendix depicting the Continuum of Autonomy for all participants.

Louise felt strongest regarding the lack of autonomy during the coursework stage,

No, I did not feel like I had autonomy, but that is probably why I was more successful. I had deadlines I had to meet. I worked that into my schedule. I knew I had things to do and that became part of my daily activity. I actually worked a lot on my coursework in the evenings. I knew I had to get stuff done. The assignments were pretty cut and dry, they give you an assignment and maybe you got a little autonomy in the fact that you were supposed to be doing this or that and which direction you want to go, but there wasn't a tremendous amount of freedom there, there were things your professors wanted to see.

If we consider the range of autonomy as a continuous scale moving from no autonomy, as Louise felt, to a lot of autonomy, Heaton would be next to fall on the scale.

When I think about autonomy in the phase of coursework, you definitely had a lot less autonomy during the coursework phase. The two years of courses, your life was, you take these two classes this term and these two next and the path was already determined for you. The timelines, the expectations, the assignments...you had autonomy in in choosing the topics you might write about. When I think about autonomy in terms of balancing family and the job, somehow, I did that because I put those weekends on my calendar, they were protected and nothing else was going to interfere. You couldn't miss class or you would fail the course. Papers were due at deadlines and you had to get it done.

Arlene moves along the continuum of autonomy. She indicated she did not feel a lot of autonomy during the coursework but is not as strong in her feelings as Louise and Heaton.

We had some autonomy with topics that were given to us, we could choose how we wanted to go forward with those, but it was pretty set.

This is the coursework, this is the expectation, here is the syllabus.

Tallie began to tip the scale of autonomy. She felt that she had the autonomy to access the support network if she chose, but in regards to the actual program indicated, "there are structures in place, it is organized, it is linear." The remaining participants did not elaborate on their feelings but moved down the scale and indicated they did feel they had autonomy during the coursework stage of the program. Bob says he felt the program was built on the idea of socially constructing knowledge, Jim stated that at the time he felt he had autonomy in the program, and Wilfred communicated a similar feeling through his simple answer of yes. The participant's autonomy needs, although they fell on various positions within the scale, were met which increased their feelings of competence. Participants also felt increased competence due to feelings of relatedness to the curriculum and classmates.

Relatedness Needs Were Met Which Led to Increased Competence

Self Determination Theory defines relatedness with a variety of synonymous words including, aligned, united, joined, or affiliated. When participants were asked to discuss their feelings of relatedness, they could choose to focus on a variety of factors including relatedness to the coursework and learning, relatedness to their cohort peers, or relatedness to the faculty and advisors. For the most part, participants indicated a strong feeling of relatedness to the coursework and/or their peers.

Heaton felt a strong relatedness to the coursework but not as strong with his peers as he had in previous programs. That said, he still appreciated the relationships he had during the coursework.

In all of my learning, I felt like it was applicable. It made me a better school administrator or a better leader, so I definitely saw relatedness. The things I learned, especially in qualitative and quantitative research helps me to be a better consumer of the research I encounter in my job. So, yeah, I would say I definitely felt relatedness to the content and the learning experiences.

My doctorate (coursework) was with a lot of people I didn't know very well. I only knew them through the coursework. I sat with the same people throughout and they become your group mates for assignments and stuff like that. We enjoyed going to lunch together and that kind of stuff, I haven't kept in touch. We did not keep that connection. We talked about, when you are defending, we will come cheer you on, but I have no idea where people are and who has or hasn't finished. I might run into a few people, at a conference, and we have a few chit-chat moments or a hug, but the connections aren't as deep as they were in other programs because I didn't have the opportunity for those other

interactions outside the cohort. But, I definitely enjoyed having the same people working on projects together, having inside jokes, that is one part I enjoyed about my graduate experience is the relationships.

Tallie felt a strong sense of relatedness between the coursework and her professional practices.

If you are thinking in terms of coursework to professional practice, it was tight. The structure of the classes fit my lifestyle and was what I needed. When I first started, it was more of a traditional structure, but by the time I got toward finishing the coursework they had moved to more of a standards-based program where you had to demonstrate certain competencies that aligned with what we were doing. I really liked that and when I work with people who have gone through a doctoral program, I can tell who has gone through the one I went through versus others.

Tallie also felt a strong sense of relatedness to her peers as she told me they went on a trip together after they completed the comprehensive exams. She did not go into great detail, however, throughout our discussions it was evident she had created valuable relationships with her cohort peers.

Jim felt very related to both the coursework and his cohort peers.

I think this is probably the most applicable in my situation because during the coursework the relatedness was really high. I could see if all pertained to leadership, I was working in education at the time and it all fit as far as helping me do my current job better.

During the coursework time I had a classmate who, we rode to class together. It was about a 90-mile drive to class. We rode together each day and developed a really close friendship. I would say that is part of

the reason I kept going to class, especially in the last semester when I wasn't in an education career anymore. I was enjoying the learning, but we were kind of in this together, so I think I would be remiss if I didn't say that played some type of role in completing the coursework.

Bob told a story about one class in which he did not feel a strong sense of relatedness, but says,

Other than that, I really really loved the coursework, especially the first summer. I felt a relatedness to the classmates and even the advisor, although he didn't do much to help me personally, I felt ok with him.

Arlene and Louise were the only two participants who were a little more hesitant to admit they felt the coursework was completely related to their day to day work.

Arlene said,

There are a lot of times when I questioned how this is going to be beneficial. But, I think the conversations we had around the coursework was more reliable for me because I was saying, "OK, I am not dealing with this, but I could" Or somebody would bring things to the table and I could provide input based on what I read and we would have deeper conversations but it just kind of varied. It varied with the time of what was happening and with everyone's daily life in education. There were times when I was thinking, I don't think this is valuable to me and other times I needed to dig deeper.

Louise has similar feelings,

The coursework was related to each other, but every once in a while, I would question how it was related to real life. That is kind of academic

life versus what I consider real life. In the academic world there is a lot more relevance than where I am in the K-12 setting. Especially in a small K-12 setting.

Theme #3: Changes in Feeling of Autonomy and Relatedness Caused Participants to Rethink Priorities and Personal Goals

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 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. However, 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 adjunctly 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.

Jim:

The one place where I didn't feel like I had control was when I changed advisors and the topic wasn't going to work anymore. My previous advisor and I had decided this was going to be the topic and were working on it. Then they said, this doesn't fit for an Ed.D. program and when I couldn't really explore the topic I wanted to...it wasn't worth it.

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 anybody 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 Relatedness

The role of the advisor, during the dissertation stage of the program is essential (Berg & Ferber, 1983; Tinto, 1975). While many participants communicated they did not have a relationship with undergrad or master's level advisors, they needed the guidance and insight of their dissertation advisor.

Bob did not experience a change in his advisor but lamented that he regrets not asking for a new advisor as he did not see eye to eye with the advisor assigned to him.

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 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 talked to a professor in the program and he told me they wanted me to come back and finish and I said, absolutely, I am in. But, that spring things got crazy, we put my mother in hospice and she passed away. I made the decision to leave my job and there was a

period of time where I couldn't focus and think about what I wanted for me. At that point, right at that point, 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 started to experience some health issues, toward the end of the coursework, I was pretty busy as it was with the coursework and my full-time job. I was put in the hospital and found out I had some pretty serious health concerns. At the same time, my mom started having health issues. She was living with me, so that put more of a strain. Finally, I got to the point between my health needs, my mom's health needs, and working full time that something had to give and it was the dissertation work. 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:

My youngest child had a lot of medical issues and we were transitioning through that. I had moved to a new job, responsibilities had changed. 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 tried, I completed my specialist degree because that was more important than the dissertation. I asked for extensions a couple of times, but where I was with my child, 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. In my position, my board would like to see me finish and is supportive of it, but the job is too intense for me, and you know, dealing with the personal changes, like moving...

Jim:

My main motivation for making a career change was having more time with my family. I was making sure I preserved that. The time I wasn't working, it didn't make sense for me to work on my dissertation when I wasn't getting fed. 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:

Finally, I said, Hey, I am spending \$1,500 a year just to keep myself attached to the university for the dissertation. I had to say I am not going to have the time to get it done. We had a board change and my duties have not changed, but the amount of time I was spending, 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, knowing that my other child, is busy with athletics and school, so I don't know whether it was the perfect storm, but that is how it has felt the last few years and I have to put the kids and family ahead of the dissertation.

Summary

This chapter explored the various themes that emerged from the 21 interviews conducted with seven participants. Themes that emerged were passion for learning led participants to pursue the degree, motivation was built during the first stage of the program, and changes in feelings of autonomy and relatedness led participants to rethink priorities and personal goals. Within each of these three themes were subthemes exploring the participant's experiences related to passion, motivation, and change. These themes support the study's theoretical framework, Self-Determination Theory. The next chapter will continue to unpack the themes as they relate to Self-Determination Theory. The chapter will provide an overview of the study, summarize answers to the research question, provide implications for practice, and suggest areas of future study.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter provides a summary of the study and discusses how the findings in Chapter 5 addressed the research question of the phenomenological research regarding if and how the needs of Self Determination Theory, autonomy, competence and relatedness, are met during doctoral program stages and whether the decision to discontinue work on the dissertation is impacted. After the research question is addressed, the chapter will relate the findings to the literature. Finally, implications and recommendations for students, faculty and program administrators will be examined and potential future research on the topic of educational doctoral students will be explored.

Summary of the Study

The literature review in Chapter 2 began by explaining the increased need for faculty and administrators with doctoral credentials due to the growing emphasis on post-secondary education (Pauley, Cunningham, & Toth, 1999). This increase in need, coupled with an attrition rate between 40-60% poses a complex issue with some responsibility on the university and some on the student (Berelson, 1960; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Kraska, 2008; Nettles & Millet, 2006).

Institutional factors that exert influence on persistence were found by Lovitt (2001) to be more influential than student factors. Institutions are responsible for student selection, program structure and flexibility, advising and mentoring (Smith, et al. 2006). Program personnel are often conscientious in determining who is admitted to the doctoral program (Perkins & Lowenthal, 2014) due to the amount of work students and faculty are required to do and with the understanding that attrition is an issue. Programs offering an educational doctorate differ from programs in other areas because students often have a career prior to the pursuit of the doctoral degree (Shulman, et al., 2006).

Regarding program structure, Bowen and Rudestine (1992) found that adding structure to a doctoral program, in the form of objectives, incentives, and timelines could make the program more efficient. Self Determination Theory would counter this idea indicating students need autonomy to develop and function effectively (Deci & Ryan, 1985). A balance of structure is vital to a student's success as a program with little structure may leave students feeling frustrated while a program that is too structured may stifle a student's creativity (Smith, et al. 2006).

A variety of research indicates the role of the advisor is critical in graduate student retention (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Golde & Dore, 2001; Lovitts, 2001). Bowen & Rudestine (1992) cited inadequate or inaccurate advising, lack of interest or attention from the advisor, and unavailability of the advisor as reasons students give for leaving a program. Smith, et al. (2006) supported these findings with research claiming the relationship with an advisor can mean the difference between completing and withdrawing from the program. Foss & Foss (2008) also supported these findings by arguing the relationship between the student and advisor as the most important. The advisor must balance the roles of cheerleader and counselor and coach and critic to facilitate a successful dissertation learning process (Spillett & Moisiwicz, 2004). Ivankova and Stick (2007) found that a negative interaction with an advisor could be overcome if the student had a strong support system that could attend to their needs. Having a support system can provide students with a secure base from which they derive self-efficacy (Torres & Solberg, 2011).

Students pursuing a doctoral degree, especially those in an education program are often older adults invested in their professional career (Shulman, et al., 2006). They are balancing a variety of responsibilities, including career, financial security, and family (Daniel, Schwarz, & Teichler, 1999; Lipschutz, 1993; Smith, et al., 2006). Crook (2015) agreed with this research and found that many students are entering the doctoral program without adequate preparation. With over 30% of students funding their education from personal finances (Hoffer, et al., 2007), financial support is an important

variable in predicting doctoral student retention (Bowen & Rudestine, 1992). Becker (1963), Paulsen (2001), and Ampaw and Jaeger (2012) found that students may be willing to take the financial burden on because they perceive the investment benefits will exceed the costs. Girves and Wemmerus (1998) support this finding, indicating students who are funding their education personally are likely to continually assess the costs and benefits of staying in school. The changes in the expected benefits of costs of education will play a role in persistence (Ehrenber & Marvos, 1995).

All of the study participants were enrolled in part-time cohort based doctoral programs. Research indicates that part time enrollment could impact persistence and completion rates (Clewell, 1987; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Nettles & Millett, 2006). Nettles & Millett (2006) found that part-time students report being less satisfied with their doctoral experiences. Curran (1987) found that part-time students are often less likely to persist in a doctoral program. Ampaw and Jaeger (2012) concede their findings as counter intuitive yet reported that when the goals of completing the program go beyond the coursework, part-time students are better positioned to finish. Students who are enrolled part-time benefit from a cohort program due to the additional support from peers (Gardner, 2009). A cohort provides the opportunity to focus on group dynamics, adult development, and adult learning theory which is a natural arrangement for adult learners (Imel, 2002). The benefits of participating a cohort-based program could transfer to the student's workplace and may increase a student's motivation to complete the degree (Dorn, Papalewis, & Brown, 1996). Brien (1992) supported this finding indicating the main reason a student persists through a doctoral program is the support and encouragement from cohort members.

The study divided the doctoral program into two stages, dependent and independent. Lovitts (2001) and West, Gokalp, Vallego, Fischer, & Gupton (2011) define the stages as the course stage, which is structured and familiar and the dissertation stage which is unstructured and unfamiliar. Participants were asked about their feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness during the first and final

stages of the program. The needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness are outlined in Self-Determination Theory which is the theoretical framework for the research. Self-Determination Theory is the study of motivation on a continuum with intrinsic motivation at one end and extrinsic motivation at the other. Intrinsic motivation is derived from engaging in an activity that will result in personal enjoyment (Koester, Bemieri, & Zuckerman, 1992). Extrinsic motivation refers to the completion of an activity to achieve an award or recognition (Deci & Ryan, 2000). While Deci and Ryan (2000) identify a continuum of motivation, the movement from intrinsic to extrinsic is not a developmental process. A person could adopt behaviors along the continuum based on their prior experiences and personal factors (Ryan & Connell, 1989). Ultimately, an individual's experience of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are argued to foster the highest quality forms of motivation.

Chapter 3 of the study explored the methods utilized to conduct a sound study. The qualitative approach to research employs methods that focus on an individual's perspectives and the meaning they make of their experiences (Creswell, 2013). The study's researcher is a doctoral student in a cohort based educational leadership program. A close examination of the researcher's role was necessary to ensure credibility of the study. The researcher bracketed experiences of the phenomenon prior to beginning interviews with the participants. Bracketing is putting aside beliefs about the phenomenon so as not to interfere with seeing or intuiting the elements or structure of the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher also identified her role in the study and took notes and kept memos exploring how her background and experience may shape the direction of the study (Creswell, 2014).

The study was guided by a constructivism epistemology, a perspective that recognizes each individual holds a different world view (Creswell, 2014). The theoretical perspective guiding the study was Self Determination Theory. Self Determination Theory is based on the research of Deci and Ryan and is concerned with supporting our natural or intrinsic tendencies to behave in effective and healthy ways. The methodological approach that best fit the study of doctoral students who did not persist

through writing the dissertation was phenomenology. Phenomenological studies describe an individual's perceived experiences of a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). Understanding the phenomenon was completed through a series of interviews following the three-part process described by Seidman (2013). Participants were recruited for the study through email invitations, sent to students who had been enrolled in an educational doctoral program, completed the coursework and comprehensive exam stages of the program and left the program during the dissertation writing stage of the program. Seven participants were each interviewed three times. The first interview was conducted to understand the participants life history, the second to explore their contemporary experience and the final to reflect on the meaning of the experience.

Due to proximity, all interviews were conducted on the telephone. Following guidance provided by Seidman (2013) on long-distance interviewing and the relationship between the participant and the interviewer, initial interviews were done with two participants to ensure telephone interviews would provide an adequate setting to explore the phenom. Steps were taken to redress the imbalance that can be caused by telephone interviews. The researcher sought and secured informed consent, set times for interviews, ensured adhering to the scheduled times and interview lengths, and consciously worked to use the telephone to convey their presence, consideration, interest and respect with careful attention not to be patronizing (Seidman, 2013).

Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. After the first two interviews were conducted and transcribed, the researcher sent transcribed interviews to the participant to ensure the participant was comfortable that the words they used to describe the experience were accurate of their feelings and to provide the participant an opportunity to reflect on the experience of the phenom and explore any additional thoughts or feelings that may have been evoked during the interviews. Once the participant had time to review the first two interview transcriptions, a final interview was scheduled to reflect on the meaning of the experience. As interviews were conducted and transcripts were typed, the

researcher kept notes on key ideas that emerged from the interviews in order to assist in identifying themes. Descriptive coding was used to identify ideas that were common across interviews, emotional coding was used to identify times the participant showed greater feeling for an idea due to increase in voice volume, laughter, pauses, or other indicators of emotion, and causation coding was used to discern motives, processes and the complexity of influences on the phenomena (Miles, et al. 2014).

Descriptive codes were assigned to passages that resonated with similar passages from additional interviews. For example, when participants were asked about feelings of autonomy during the coursework stage of the program, they had common answers indicating a lack of autonomy during this stage of the program. These passages were circled and the words “No Autonomy” were written in the margins of the transcriptions. Emotional coding was used through colorful highlighting. Colors represented different emotions the participant was exhibiting. For many participants, a feeling of regret and disappointment was evident when they were asked about the feelings they experienced when they made the decision to discontinue work on the dissertation, these passages were highlighted in purple and a key was kept to indicate purple meant regret and disappointment. While these feelings were common across participants, the passages were often circled and the words “regret and disappointment” were written in the margin of the transcripts to indicate a descriptive code. Causation coding was used by keeping notes in the margins of phrases that discerned a variety of continued influences on a phenomena, for example, participants would discuss frustration with a lack of autonomy led to reprioritizing their dissertation and putting more emphasis on their career and time with their family which made it more and more difficult to work on the dissertation and ultimately led to the decision to discontinue enrollment in the program and the pursuit of the doctoral degree.

Throughout the study the researcher operated under the highest ethical standards. In addition to keeping a journal acknowledging biases the researcher may have that prohibit clarity of reporting, the researcher obtained informed consent from all participants, and maintained participant confidentiality

by assigning pseudonyms to the participants and changing key names and settings. Chapter three discussed design issues including credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability.

Delimitations of the study were discussed. The delimits of the study included participants who completed the first stage of an educational doctorate degree but did not persist through the final stage, students who were enrolled in a cohort program that consisted of coursework, comprehensive exams, and a dissertation, and those seeking an Ed.D. Limitation of the study included participants who were pursuing an Ed.D. in a cohort setting which may not be transferable to students who are pursuing a Ph.D. in a residential program or those in a program without a cohort-based structure.

Chapter four introduced the seven participants and explored their educational history, reasons for and motivations behind program enrollment, feelings of autonomy, feelings of competence, feelings of relatedness, reasons for attrition, and feelings experienced when participants made the decision to discontinue work on the dissertation. Participants included three females and four males who had been enrolled in a doctoral program at various colleges in the Midwest that offered cohort based educational leadership programs.

Chapter five explored the themes that emerged from the participant interviews which explored their lived experiences. The themes that emerged were passion for learning led participants to pursue the degree, motivation was built during the first stage of the program, and changes in feelings of autonomy and relatedness led participants to rethink priorities and personal goals, each with subthemes.

Theme #1: Passion for learning led participants to pursue the degree

- Family history of educators
- Love of learning

Theme #2: Motivation was built during the first stage of the program

- Autonomy needs were met which led to increased competence

- Relatedness needs were met which led to increased competence

Theme #3: Changes in feelings of autonomy and relatedness caused participants to rethink priorities and personal goals

- Changes in autonomy
- Changes in relatedness
- Changes in personal goals

Summary Answer to the Research Question

The overarching research question guiding the phenomenological study was: *What are the experiences of doctoral students who leave their programs during the dissertation stage and decide not to finish the degree requirements?* The following section addresses how the research question was answered through the three themes of passion for learning, motivation during the first stage, and change in feelings of autonomy and relatedness.

Theme 1: Passion For Learning Led Participants to Pursue the Degree

The participants had, and for many continue to have, a passion for learning. They expressed a passion for their personal education as well as the role they played in educating others. The theme of passion can be discussed through the two subthemes that emerged.

- *Family History of Educators.* Many of the participants discussed their family's history as it related to education. Participants had a variety of family members who were teachers, principals, and/or school board members. Their exposure to education as a career coupled with the value their families placed on education led them to feel comfortable in the school setting. They discussed school as a place with happy memories which translated to a comfort later in life that played a role in their decision to pursue additional degrees.
- *Love of Learning.* All of the participants expressed a genuine love of learning. Many of them reminisced on the enjoyment and comfort they experienced when they were in an educational

setting. The participants did not struggle in their undergraduate degrees and many of them moved quickly into earning a Master's degree. The majority of the participants, due to their love of learning, did not hesitate when a mentor or coworker nudged them to pursue the doctoral degree. While they admitted doctoral coursework could be challenging, none of them considered quitting the program during the first stage. They appreciated the program's structure and thrived in a situation that provided deadlines and clear expectations.

Theme 2: Motivation Was Built During the First Stage of the Program

Participants were often motivated to pursue their doctoral degree with encouragement from a previous instructor, coworker, or mentor. Once the idea was suggested, participants fostered the idea of earning the degree. They made the decision to enroll based on motivations to increase career opportunities coupled with a personal goal of achieving the highest degree possible in their field. Their internal and external motivations proved to be strong enough to get them through the coursework stage of the program. Two subthemes support their combination of internal and external motivators

- *Autonomy needs were met which led to increased competence.* The majority of participants expressed they felt little autonomy during the coursework stage of the program. They were motivated by and appreciated the program structure and deadlines. They knew class dates and expectations and felt comfortable in the classroom setting. The coursework stage was similar to their previous educational experiences with assignment expectations clearly outlined in a syllabus and an understanding that missed deadlines would result in failure to complete the course. Due to their comfort in the classroom they moved through the coursework as they had in previous education settings and found motivation in completing the expectations.
- *Relatedness needs were met which led to increased competence.* Participants discussed a strong feeling of relatedness with the coursework and their cohort peers throughout the coursework stage of the dissertation. The coursework was connected to the work many were doing in their

career and the coursework combined with the opportunity for group discussions was vital in their learning. For some, the relationships they built with their peers was pivotal in ensuring they completed the coursework stage. They expressed a feeling of being in the process together and understood their role as someone who needed and provided support.

Theme #3: 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. Two subthemes explain the changes participants experienced during the dissertation writing stage of the program.

- *Changes in Autonomy.* 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 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.

The analysis of the interview data revealed participants were devoted to their education. They had navigated a variety of educational degrees and spent significant amounts of time and money toward their love of learning. For many, their comfort level was high when they were in a structured environment with clear expectations and schedules however those feelings of confidence began to diminish as they moved into the dissertation writing stage of the program which required them to create the structure and expectations. As they struggled to find time to devote to their dissertation career and family responsibilities took over and led them to reprioritize the importance of the doctoral degree. In the end, the participants left the program feeling they had gained a tremendous amount from the coursework but the dissertation was no longer something they were able to complete.

Discussions of Themes with Prior Literature

Three themes, each with subthemes emerged that clearly aligned with the literature presented in chapter two. By sharing their lived experience, the participants provided additional understanding to the discussion around attrition in doctoral students.

Theme 1: Passion for Learning Led Participants to Pursue the Degree

A love of learning was instilled in the participants from a very young age. Having parents and extended relatives who worked as educators and in roles valuing education, participants were exposed to the importance of school and their education. This exposure led to a feeling of comfort and happiness in school. Student factors that impact a student's potential success in post-secondary education include academic performance, financial security, and a system of support (Daniel, et al., 1999; & Lipschutz, 1993; Smith, et al., 2006). The participants in the study had superior academic performance throughout their years of education pursuits as well as financial security through their career as an educator and the support of family as well as peers in the cohort. Securing these factors increased their ability to focus on the opportunity to learn. The participants enjoyed the coursework stage of the doctoral program, they felt secure in their academic abilities and confident in their participation of the program.

Tinto (1993) explored the importance of socialization in relation to a student's retention in higher education. Socialization is the process through which an individual learns to adopt the values, skills, attitudes and norms necessary for membership in a given group or organization (Gardner, 2008; Kuh & Whitt, 1988). Due to their roles as educators, and history of educational enjoyment, the participants were comfortable in the higher education setting. This comfort, coupled with the support they felt in the cohort setting increased their confidence. Participants were able to share their knowledge with their workplace which increased feelings of confidence and connectedness. Passion for learning motivated students to pursue a doctoral degree. Strong feelings of competence in their

academic abilities and a connectedness with the learning and peers helped them stay motivated to complete the coursework stage of the dissertation.

Theme 2: Motivation was Built During the First Stage of the Program

Internal motivation or intrinsic motivation exists when a person engages in an activity with an outcome that has no consequences aside from personal enjoyment (Zuckerman, et al., 1978). The participants' love of learning served to intrinsically motivate them to pursue a doctoral degree. External motivation or extrinsic motivation refers to the motivation a person has for doing an activity when it is rewarded with instrumental value. The hope of increased professional opportunity served as extrinsic motivation to pursue the doctoral degree. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation rest on opposite ends of a continuum in the Self Determination Theory sub-theory called Organismic Integration Theory. Organismic Integration Theory explains the continuum of motivation from amotivation (lacking intent) to intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Interviews with study participants indicate a balance of extrinsic and intrinsic motivators were present as they worked toward the doctoral degree. During the coursework stage of the program, feelings around autonomy and relatedness encouraged deeper motivation to continue pursuing the degree.

Participants expressed a lack of autonomy during the coursework stage of the doctoral program. The lack of autonomy resulted in providing the participants an external motivation to complete the coursework expectations. On the continuum of motivation introjected regulation is an extrinsic motivation in which people perform a task because they feel pressured to do so (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Participants discussed the feelings of course deadlines and structure and that they had to complete the expectations or they would fail the course. These deadlines and expectations served as an external motivation to move forward in the coursework. As participants completed expectations their self-esteem increased and they felt additional competence toward their ability to complete the degree.

External motivation to continue pursuing the degree also came from feelings participants had around relatedness to the classwork and peers within the cohort. Participants built strong relationships with their classmates, often discussing the connections they felt through examples of trips taken together, long commutes in which they built a special bond and emotional conversations had. Dorn, Papalewis, & Brown (1996) emphasize the importance of a cohesive group and the commitment they feel toward the success of all the group's members. Many participants discussed the responsibility they felt in completing the coursework because peers expected it of them. They appreciated the inside jokes and sense of connection which supports the findings of West, Gokalp, Fischer, & Gupton (2011) that found cohort participants gain knowledge not accessible to those outside the cohort.

Theme 3: Changes in Feelings of Autonomy and Relatedness Caused Participants to Rethink Priorities and Personal Goals

Participants experienced significant changes in their feelings of autonomy and relatedness once they moved to the dissertation stage of the doctoral program. The changes caused them to reprioritize their motivation for pursuing the degree. Ultimately, they made the decision to leave the program without completing the dissertation, indicating there was not enough motivation to keep the dissertation on the priority list. Participants discussed feelings of change related to the autonomy they experienced from the coursework stage to the dissertation stage of the program, in the relatedness they felt due to struggles to connect with advisors and changes in the time they were able to allocate to the work.

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, et al., (2006) address 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 participants classmates did continue with the program and finished the dissertation stage successfully, they 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; Golde & Dore, 2001; Lovitts, 2001). Bowen and Rudestine (1992) and Golde (2000) both comment on the key role the advisor plays in a student's 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 difficulty in establishing the relationship supports the finding of Kogler Hill, Hilton Bahniuk, & Dobos (1989) comparing advising to a mentorship. Participants were looking to their advisor for knowledge on how to move through the dissertation stage as well as for supervision and

accountability of their performance (Monsour & Corman, 1991). 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 & Moisiejewicz, 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 (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 feelings of tension, anxiety and stress were not worthwhile.

Implications of the Study

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 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 participants in this study were all professional adults with a love of learning and a passion for their education. They did not make the decision to enter the doctoral program without careful consideration, however as they moved through the stages of the program they experienced changes that caused them to reconsider their priorities.

The information in this study supports current research indicating the important role of the advisor in a doctoral program. Smith, et al. (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 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.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the findings in this study, the following includes recommendations for practice for institutions and students considering the pursuit of a doctoral degree.

Recommendations for Institutions:

- *Institutions should evaluate students' autonomy needs as they progress through the program and attempt to pair students with advisors based on needs.* As institutions continue to be committed to offering educational opportunity to a diverse group of learners, it is important to consider the diverse needs of the population. Most participants in this study appreciated the lack of autonomy during the coursework stage of the program. Students who are working adults, juggling career and family demands, appreciated the lack of flexibility in program expectations. The sudden change in freedom was difficult for them to maneuver and they needed increased accountability to someone aside from themselves. Assessing student needs and determining who would do best to have an advisor that operates in a way that encourages frequent check-ins and holds high expectations would be beneficial to both the institution and the student.
- *Offer opportunities for students to gather and work on the dissertation after they finish the coursework stage of the program.* Providing a space and scheduled time for students to gather to work on their dissertation or discuss their progress in writing could be helpful in ensuring students maintain the relational connection they felt during the coursework. Many participants commented on the idea that everyone was at different stages in the dissertation and they didn't

feel they could contact classmates to ask questions, however if they were provided a space to come together they may understand they are experiencing similar feelings and challenges and it could be an opportunity to continue building their learning.

Recommendations for students:

- *Understand the importance of advocating for your needs as you move through the doctoral program.* Many of the participants commented on their regret at not vocalizing their need for increased accountability, hand-holding, and guidance during the dissertation stage of the program. Had they understood the result would be an incomplete dissertation, they would have been a better self-advocate when they first noticed they were not having their needs met. Students at this level of education were questioning their abilities and lacking the confidence they needed to advocate. If students go into a program understanding they have to express their needs they may say something before they begin reprioritizing and putting the dissertation on the back burner.
- *Attempt to finish the dissertation as quickly as possible after the coursework stage of the doctoral program.* This seems obvious, but many students admitted to taking six months off after coursework and the break in the rigid schedule was enough for them to struggle to return to the discipline necessary to complete the dissertation. The break, combined with career responsibilities and family changes was often too much to overcome and students were left continually placing the dissertation at the bottom of the priority list until it became too much of a burden to tackle. While this may not be an option for all students, those who do want to return to the dissertation and complete the degree should meet with the college and see if there are dissertation writing courses or summer sessions in which they could enroll that would reignite their passion and motivation for the work.

- *Do not allow the dissertation to be put on the back burner.* Continually reprioritizing and putting career and family in front of the dissertation was the downfall for the participants. Many commented on the irony that their lives had been just as busy during the coursework stage as it was during the dissertation stage, but it was easier to put the dissertation on the back burner because there were no repercussions (failed assignment, letting the group down, etc.). Making sure the dissertation remains as much a priority as the coursework had been will ensure it does not get placed on the back burner.

Recommendations for Future Research

- *Recommendation 1.* Conduct a study examining the needs of autonomy in people who completed the doctoral degree. Understanding the student's needs during the coursework and dissertation stages in students who completed the degree could be helpful as institutions begin to consider addressing the needs of all students and understanding various levels of autonomy students need to be successful.
- *Recommendation 2.* Assess student needs and compare the results with advisor behaviors. Students who need high levels of guidance and frequent check-ins need an advisor who has the time and schedule that allows them to do so. Evaluating which students need high levels of support and pairing them with advisors who are able to offer support may increase student outcomes.
- *Recommendation 3.* Replicate this study with participants who have not earned a specialist degree. The majority of the participants in this study had earned a Master's in administration and an Administration Specialist degree, providing them increased career opportunities in educational leadership roles. They were able to secure dream jobs as a result of the Specialist degree. Conducting this study on students who have not earned a specialist degree may provide additional insight into reasons for student attrition.

- *Recommendation #4.* Conduct a study to determine the degree to which finances played a role in student's decision to discontinue working toward the doctoral degree. Students relying on their personal finances as sources of support are more likely to continually assess the costs and benefits of staying in school (Girves & Wemmerus, 1998). Participants in the study were all funding their doctoral program from personal funds. They cited cost as a consideration when making the decision to discontinue the dissertation but did not indicate the cost was the ultimate reason for their attrition. Additional research should be done to determine the impact cost makes on the student's decision to discontinue.
- *Recommendation #5.* Research should be done to understand the impact of taking time off after completing the coursework and comprehensive exam stage of the program. Participants indicated a four to six-month break from research and doctoral work once they had completed the comprehensive exams which may have impacted the reprioritization of their personal goals and the motivation to continue work on the dissertation. Studying students who did not take a break after comprehensive exams could provide insight into the importance of staying in a tight and controlled schedule.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study was conducted to gain an understanding of the experiences seven students had in a cohort-based educational doctoral program and what led to their decision to discontinue pursuit of the doctoral degree while they were in the dissertation stage of the program.

Themes that emerged imply:

- *passion* for learning led them to enroll in the program
- *motivation*, fed by strict program structure and strong feelings of relatedness toward their peers and the curriculum kept them moving through the coursework stage of the program

- *changes* in feelings of autonomy and relatedness led them to reprioritize their personal goals and ultimately discontinue working toward the doctoral degree.

Participants expressed disappointment and frustration in their inability to complete the degree, but also an appreciation for the opportunity to learn and grow as professionals and leaders. Participants ultimately determined that the degree was not necessary to fulfill career or personal aspirations. While factors such as less autonomy during the dissertation stage, and an advisor who provided stronger accountability measures may have motivated the students to continue their doctoral degree pursuit, the participants all accepted the decision to discontinue was theirs as was the responsibility to hold themselves accountable to the decision.

Final Reflection

The irony that I have completed a dissertation study focused on reasons students do not complete the dissertation in an educational doctorate is not lost on me. The stories the participants shared were motivators for me to complete the study. I look forward to future research examining the large numbers of students who put time, energy, and money into advancing their education only to walk away at the final hour. Changes in institutional practices as well as the way students approach the decision to enroll in a doctoral program are necessary in order to ensure an increase in the number of students graduating with the title doctor. I am humbled to know that my doctoral title could not have been achieved without the stories of those who did not.

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APPENDIX A**SAMPLE RECRUITMENT EMAIL**

Dear _____,

My name is Ellie Burns. I am a doctoral student in the School of Education at Drake University, seeking participants for my dissertation study. You were referred to me by _____. My study is a phenomenological study regarding the Drake Educational Leadership Doctoral Program. I am seeking to understand why students do not persist through the dissertation writing stage of the program.

To collect data for this study, I am seeking students who were previously enrolled in the Drake Educational Leadership program and who completed the coursework and comprehensive exams but did not complete the dissertation. Your participation would last approximately ninety days between early February and mid-March and would consist of three interviews via Skype or over the telephone. The specific day(s) and times will be set up at your convenience.

As a student in the Educational Leadership program, I understand the demands of the program and how overwhelming the expectations can be for a professional adult. My hope is that through this study we may come to understand why students do not complete the dissertation, although they completed the coursework and comprehensive exams. This information will be useful to future students who can take these reasons into consideration prior to enrolling and for institutions of higher education who can adapt to the needs of its students.

Please know that your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. Additionally, if any questions make you uncomfortable or you wish not to answer you will not be required to do so. If you are interested in participating, please contact me via email at ellie.burns@drake.edu or by phone at 270-293-4213.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Best,

Ellie Burns

APPENDIX B**EMAIL TO INTERESTED PARTICIPANTS**

Good Morning,

Thank you for your email! I am excited to hear you are willing to participate in my dissertation study. As the previous email indicated, I am conducting a phenomenological study on why student's leave a doctoral program. A review of the literature indicates a doctoral program can be broken down into three stages; coursework, exams, and dissertation. My dissertation is seeking to understand why students leave a program once they have completed the first two stages of the program. Your voice will be valuable as I seek to understand reasons students discontinue their pursuit of the doctoral degree.

I've attached the Drake University informed consent document, which outlines how the study will be conducted, the expectations of you as a participant, and any risks or benefits you may incur as a participant. Please review this document carefully. If, after review, your willingness to participate remains, please sign, scan and email to me. Please include a few days and times within the next week you are available to meet for an initial interview. The first interview will be one hour or less. My schedule is flexible and I will do my best to accommodate times that work for you.

If I have left out any details or you have any questions do not hesitate to ask! You can call me at xxx.xxx.xxxx or email me at email@drake.edu. Again, thank you for your interest, I look forward to hearing from you and learning about your educational journey.

Best,

Ellie Burns

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW SCRIPTS AND QUESTIONS

Interview 1 Introduction – establish the context of the participants’ experience (Seidman, 2013).

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study and talk with me today. We will meet three times throughout this study. The purpose of today’s meeting is for me to have an understanding of your experiences in education and how they led you to pursue coursework towards an educational doctorate degree in a cohort setting. This interview should last between 45-90 minutes. If there are any questions you do not want to answer you can decline to address them. You can also let me know if, at any time, you decide you would like to withdraw from the interview and/or study. Do you have any questions before we start?

1. Tell me about your elementary and secondary school experiences:
 - a. Did you attend an urban or rural school?
 - b. Was education valued in your family?
 - i. Did you have relatives with advanced degrees?
 - ii. Was going to college an expectation?
 - c. What did you enjoy about school when you were young?
 - d. What did you dislike or find difficult in school when you were young?
2. Tell me about your undergraduate college experience:
 - a. Where did you attend undergraduate school?
 - b. How did you decide to attend the college you did?
 - c. How did you choose your undergraduate major?
 - d. Tell me about your relationship with your advisor in undergraduate school.
 - e. What did you enjoy and not enjoy about college at the undergraduate level?
 - f. What activities, clubs or groups were you involved in?
 - g. What motivated you to complete your undergraduate degree?
3. Tell me about your graduate school experience:
 - a. Where did you attend graduate school and what did you study?
 - b. Why did you choose to attend the school you did and study what you did?
 - c. What was your life like when you attended graduate school (married, single, working, etc.)?
 - d. What experiences, during graduate school, stand out as positive?
 - e. What experiences, during graduate school, stand out as negative or difficult?
 - f. Describe your advisor during graduate school and your relationship.
 - g. How long did it take to complete graduate school?
 - h. What motivated you to complete your graduate school degree?
4. Tell me about the coursework you completed in the Ed.D. Program:
 - a. What motivated you to apply for a doctoral program?
 - b. Did you explore a variety of doctoral programs?
 - i. Why did you choose the educational program you did?
 - c. Tell me about the program’s admissions/acceptance process.

- i. Did you know anyone else who was involved in the program previously or who would be with your cohort?
 - ii. What were your thoughts and feelings around being in a cohort of students?
- d. Did you have a timeline and plan for completing the degree?
 - i. Did you know the expectations for completing the degree?
 - ii. Did you have a topic in mind for your future research?
- e. What did you enjoy about the classwork portion of the program?
- f. What did you dislike about the classwork portion of the program?
- g. What motivated you to complete the classwork portion of the program?

Interview 2: Details of the Experience - allows participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it occurred (Seidman, 2013).

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me again. This is the second of our three-part interview process. This interview will provide an opportunity for us to discuss the coursework you completed in the doctoral program in more depth and begin to explore if and how your needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness were met or thwarted. As I mentioned in the first interview, if there are any questions you prefer not to answer, you have the right to decline and if, at any time, you would like to withdraw from the interview or the study you may do so. This interview should last 45-90 minutes. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. Describe your life during coursework (married, working, children, etc.)
2. Did you experience any life changes while you were completing coursework (divorce, birth of a child, new job, etc.)?
3. Tell me about your academic advisor and your relationship with your advisor.
4. The definition of autonomy is “freedom from external control or influence.” Describe your experiences regarding independence or autonomy during the Ed.D. program, prior to completing your comprehensive exams.
 - a. Describe your experiences regarding independence or autonomy during the Ed.D. program after completing your comprehensive exams.
5. The definition of competence is “the ability to do something successfully or efficiently.” Describe your feelings of competence during the Ed.D. program prior to completing the comprehensive exams.
 - a. Describe your feelings of competence after the comprehensive exams.
6. Words synonymous with relatedness are relevant, affiliated, lined, united and joined. Describe your experiences of relatedness during the Educational Leadership program before completing your comprehensive exams.
 - a. Describe your feelings of relatedness after completing your comprehensive exams.
7. Tell me about your decision to stop the Ed.D. Program.
8. Tell me about your experience and feelings once you made the decision to discontinue working toward graduation from the Ed.D. Program.

Interview 3: Reflection on the Meaning – the participant reflects on the meaning their experience holds for them.

Thank you for agreeing to talk with me during this third and final interview. This interview is an opportunity to reflect on the previous two interviews and explore any additional thoughts, ideas or

experiences you remember having during your time in the Educational Leadership program. This final interview is an opportunity to make meaning of your experience in the program. As I have mentioned in the previous interviews, you have the right to refuse to answer any of my questions as well as the right to discontinue the interview and the study at any time. This interview should last 30 – 45 minutes. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. Since our previous two interviews, what other thoughts and memories of the Ed.D. program came up?
2. How did it feel to discuss your experience in the program?
3. If I asked you to summarize your experience with the program what would you say?

Additional questions will be asked based on the previous interviews. A member check process will take place during this interview session.

APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT

Title of Study: The Educational Pursuit: A phenomenological study of attrition in the second stage of an educational doctoral program within a cohort model

Investigators: Ellie Burns

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to understand reasons students do not complete an educational doctorate program. You are being invited to participate in this study because you were enrolled in the Drake University Educational Leadership program, completed the coursework and comprehensive exams but did not complete the dissertation requirement.

Procedures

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in three interviews, all of which will be done via Skype or the telephone and will be audio recorded. The interviews will be used as a part of collecting the data appropriate for a phenomenological study:

1) A semi-structured life history interview that is designed for me to get to know you and to learn about your decision to pursue an educational doctorate at Drake University. I want to learn about your perspectives on the decision to pursue higher education and learn a little about your educational experience.

a. This interview will happen via Skype or over the telephone. The interview will be done in early to mid-February with specific days and times to fit your convenience. It will last for approximately 60 minutes.

2) A semi-structured contemporary experience interview that will explore your perceptions of the Drake Educational Leadership program. The interview will explore if and how your needs were met during the initial stages of the program and your experiences as a member of a cohort of students. The interview will begin to explore reasons you discontinued the program.

a. This interview will happen via Skype or over the telephone. The interview will be done in mid to late-February with a specific day and time of your convenience. It will last for approximately 60 minutes.

3) A semi-structured interview in which you will be asked to reflect on the meaning you make of your experiences.

a. This interview will happen via Skype or on the telephone. The interview will be done in early to mid-March with a specific day time of your convenience. It will last for approximately 60 minutes.

This study will take approximately three one-hour sessions over a 90-day time period. Additional time will be required for you to review the transcripts of the interviews to check for clarity and accuracy.

Risks

If you decide to participate in this study, there are few foreseeable risks. Your time will be used to gain insight into the reasons students do not persist through an educational doctorate program. You may experience feelings of discomfort while discussing the reasons you did not continue to pursue a doctoral degree. You may feel anger, regret, frustration, or a drop in self-esteem. If you are negatively impacted at any time during or after this study, please contact Drake IRB at irb@drake.edu or 515-271-3472.

Benefits

If you decide to participate in this study there may be no direct benefit to you. A desired outcome is an understanding of how institutions can adapt educational doctorate programs to increase the number of students who persist to the degree. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit society by increasing the number of students who persist to earn an Ed.D.

Compensation

You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Participant Rights

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. If you decide to not participate in the study or leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.

Confidentiality

Any information obtained in connection with this research study that can be identified with you will be disclosed only with your permission; your results will be kept confidential. In any written reports or publications, no one will be identified or identifiable. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Drake University, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken: your identity will be kept confidential and any identifiers (such as your name and any names noted during the interview) will be replaced with pseudonyms in the interview transcripts. All documentation of the interviews, including digital recordings and their transcripts, will be stored on a password protected computer. All documents and observation notes will also be kept on a password protected computer.

Parties likely to view the data include Dr. Catherine Gillespie, my Drake University dissertation committee chair, and other members of my dissertation committee. The data collected will be retained for a minimum of three years and destroyed when it is deemed no longer useful for research purposes. If the results are published, your identity will remain confidential.

Contacts and Questions

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

- For further information about the study contact:
 - Ellie Burns (Researcher) Dr. Catherine Gillespie (Advisor)

Ellie.burns@drake.edu Catherine.gillespie@drake.edu

270-293-4213

515-770-8863

- If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 271-3472, irb@drake.edu.

You may keep a copy of this form for your records

Statement of Consent:

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You may keep a copy of this form for your records. Even after signing this form, please know that you may withdraw from the study at any time.

I consent to participate in the study and to be audiotaped.

Participant's Name (printed) _____

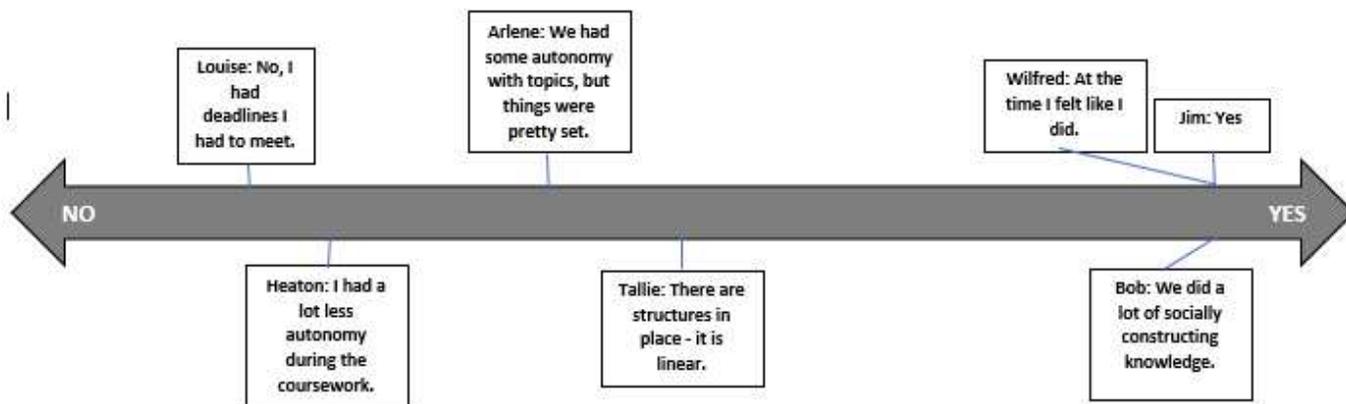
(Participant's Signature)

(Date)

APPENDIX E

CONTINUUM OF AUTONOMY

Did you feel like you had autonomy during the Coursework Stage of the Doctoral Program?



Did you feel like you had autonomy during the Dissertation Stage of the Doctoral Program?

