National Center for School-University Partnerships

Reimagining EdD programs through Improvement Science
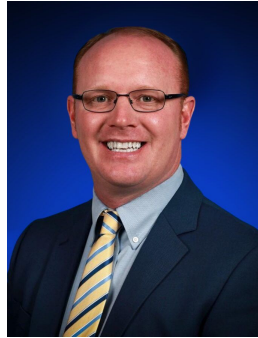
Max Yurkofsky

February 28, 2025

Introductions - National Center Team Members

NCSUP

Mary Bramlett
Program Manager, NCSUP

Bradley Roberson
Superintendent
Oxford School District

David Rock
Dean, School of Education
University of Mississippi

Denise Soares
Dean, School of Education
University of West Florida

Manuelito Biag
Improvement Advisor

David Imig
Improvement Advisor

Intended Outcomes

After today's convening, attendees will be able to:

- Articulate how improvement science is being integrated into EdD programs and explain the shift from traditional dissertation models to an Improvement Science Dissertation in Practice (ISDiP)

- Identify common challenges and opportunities in embedding improvement science within EdD programs and consider how similar strategies could be applied in their own institutional contexts

- Explore potential collaborations and next steps to advance the use of improvement science in EdD programs, including opportunities for cross-institutional research, faculty development, and shared resources

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Community Agreements

what will you commit to?

- **Be fully present**
  - *Set distractions aside and focus on the discussion*
- **Share the air**
  - *Ensure everyone has a chance to speak*
- **Seek to understand**
  - *Ask questions to clarify before responding*
- **Be mindful of your impact on others**
  - *Consider how your words may affect others*
- **Defer judgment**
  - *Stay curious and open to new ideas*
- **Maintain confidentiality**
  - *Keep what's shared here private*
- **Be generous with each other**
  - *Assume good intentions and offer support*

Today's Agenda

- Welcoming Remarks (10 min)
- Presentation (30 min)
- Small Group Reflections (5 min)
- Q & A Discussion (10 min)
- Closing Remarks (5 min)

NCSUP Shared Narrative

We aim to partner with educators, leaders, parents, students, and communities to enhance learning experiences for all.

We believe that together, we will enact meaningful change in our schools to promote student success.

By utilizing improvement science tools, we are committed to learning fast to implement well.

Join us today in our mission to advance equity, accessibility, and high-quality educational opportunities for our students.

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NCSUP Membership Benefits

ACTION
- Collaborate with other institutions and partnerships to address shared problems of practice

LEARNING
- Introductory improvement science online training
- Invitations to 4-6 convenings per year *(members will be responsible for their travel and accommodations to in-person convenings)*

CONNECTION
- Build relationships with improvement colleagues across the country

SUPPORT
- Periodic check-in calls to support improvement efforts
- A change package (a documented collection of successful interventions and techniques)

Join Today!

CURRENT ISSUE: BUILDING BRIDGES
DECEMBER 2024

Students benefit when educators bridge the continuum of professional learning between K-12 schools and other institutions.

FOCUS BUILDING BRIDGES

School-university partnerships foster lasting change in Mississippi

BY MANUELITO BIAG, DENISE A. SOARES, DAVID ROCK, BRADLEY ROBERSON, AND MARY BRAMLETT

Welcome Our Speaker: Max Yurkofsky

Max Yurkofsky obtained his Ed.D. in Educational Policy, Leadership, and Instructional Practice from the Harvard Graduate School of Education in 2020. He teaches courses in the Doctor of Education program focused on continuous improvement, leadership, collaborative inquiry, and equitable approaches to spreading change. His research centers on developing partnerships with school and system leaders to investigate how school systems can organize for continuous improvement toward more ambitious and equitable visions of learning. Dr. Yurkofsky is committed to preparing school and system leaders to strategically use improvement science, organizational theory, and collaborative leadership practices to inquire into and address high-leverage problems of practice in their settings. He partners with current and former students on research, professional learning, and writing projects focused on improving educational systems in Virginia.

Reimagining EdD programs through Improvement Science Town Hall

Max Yurkofsky
Assistant Professor & Program Coordinator
Doctor of Education Program
Radford University

Background

Over the past decade, improvement science (IS) has risen in prominence as an approach to addressing persistent and complex problems of practice in education (Bryk et al., 2015; 2020; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020).

Bryk and colleagues (2015) initially articulated six shared principles of improvement science:

1. being problem-specific and user-centered,
2. attending to variation,
3. seeing systems,
4. measuring key outcomes and processes,
5. engaging in disciplined inquiry, and
6. accelerating learning through networks.
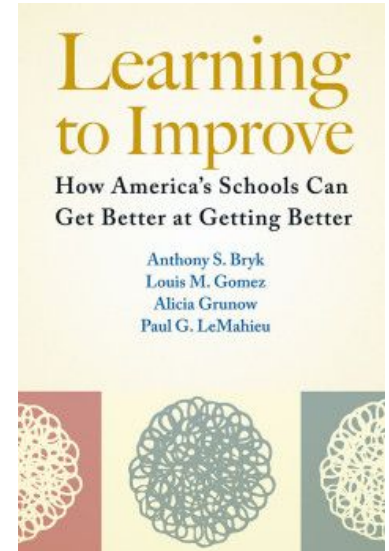
Background

Many EdD programs affiliated with the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (a growing consortium of over 135 colleges and schools of education) are working to integrate improvement science into their programs (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Perry et al., 2020).
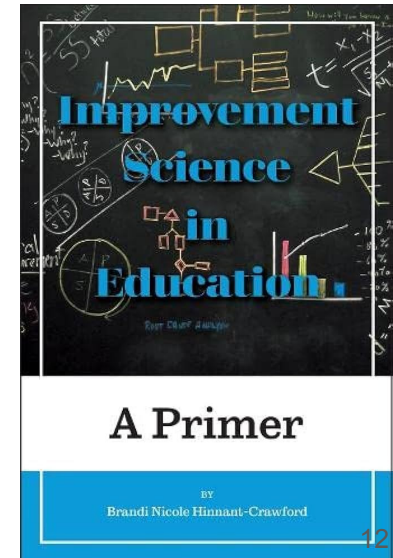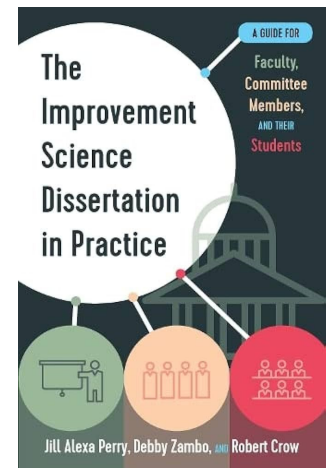
Radford University

- Comprehensive public university in Southwest Virginia
- Undergraduate enrollment: 6,161
- Total enrollment: 7,812
- The University offers:
  - 75 bachelor's degree programs in 47 disciplines and six certificates at the undergraduate level;
  - 27 master's programs in 23 disciplines,
  - five doctoral programs at the graduate level;
  - and 19 post-baccalaureate certificates and one post-master's certificate

Radford's EdD Program

- First cohort admitted in January 2020
- 3 years, 63 credits, all online.
- Two back-to-back 7-week classes per semester that meets synchronously one night a week.
- Cohorts of 15-25 students each year who work as full-time school leaders, district leaders, or teachers.
- Five courses aligned with superintendency requirements (law, governance, HR, finance, instructional leadership)
- **Students complete an improvement science dissertation in practice (ISDiP) to address a problem of practice in their systems, divided into three benchmarks.**

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Year 1
Benchmark I
Defining a problem, inquiring into how the system contributes to that problem

| **Year 2** |
| --- |
| Benchmark II |
| Developing a theory of improvement and corresponding measurement system |

Year 3
Benchmark III
Engage in iterative cycles of acting, assessing, adjusting, and spreading change

Early challenges

Traditional qualitative and quantitative methods sequence did not map neatly onto where students were in their ISDiP

Nine dissertation credits reserved for the last year of the program

Social justice courses taught by adjuncts unfamiliar with program or the ISDiP.
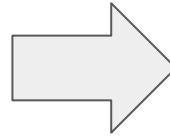
Students struggled to apply research methods and social justice coursework to their ISDiP

Students struggled to make progress on ISDiP in years 1 & 2

Dissertation chairs were overwhelmed (one professor who ran the Masters program shouldered most of the burden)

Administration helps

In Summer 2021, Radford hired three full-time faculty to teach in the EdD program. Together, the three had expertise in qualitative methods, quantitative methods, social justice, improvement science, and educational leadership.

Although Radford faculty teach a 4 x 4 load, given the intensive advising responsibilities, the EdD faculty were given 1.5 course credits each semester for chairing dissertation committees.

Brad Bizzell
Coordinator of Masters and EdD Program
Sole full-time EdD faculty
Primary dissertation chair

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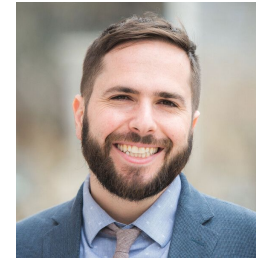
Brad Bizzell
Coordinator of Masters and EdD Program
~~Sole full-time EdD faculty~~
~~Primary dissertation chair~~

Edwin Bonney   Sarah Capello   Max Yurkofsky
Full Time EdD Faculty and dissertation chairs

Program Redesign — Three Pillars

In Fall of 2021, Bizzell led the new faculty team in an effort to redesign the EdD program to better align with the ISDiP.

<u>**Practitioner Inquiry Sequence:**</u>
We asked: What methodological skills do students need to successfully complete each stage of the ISDiP?

We realized it does not fit neatly into qual/quant or beginner/advanced groupings

<u>**Dissertation research credits**</u>
We asked: How can we organize the nine dissertation research credits to support students in completing the ISDiP and relieve the burden on dissertation chairs?

We realized these courses need to be distributed *throughout* the EdD program

<u>**Social Justice & Leadership sequence:**</u>
We asked: What knowledge and skills related to leadership, equity and social justice do students need at each stage of the ISDiP?

We realized that each stage of the dissertation benefits from different knowledge and skills

Additional Research

Bonney, Capello, and Yurkofsky also engaged in some collaborative research the 2021-2022 academic year to better understand the *current* EdD program and the landscape of improvement science EdD Programs.

CHAPTER 14

INTEGRATING IMPROVEMENT SCIENCE INTO LEADERSHIP PREPARATION PROGRAMS

Enduring Challenges and Promising Strategies

Maxwell M. Yurkofsky
Radford University

Edwin N. Bonney
Radford University

Sarah A. Capello
Radford University

The Doctor of Education (EdD) degree has historically been viewed as an unsatisfactory mix of scholarly and practitioner training (Shulman et al., 2006). In response to this dissatisfaction, the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) has cultivated a growing network of doctoral

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EdD Students' Sensemaking of Improvement Science as a Tool for Change in Education

S Sage

Edwin Nii Bonney[1] , Maxwell M. Yurkofsky[2], and Sarah A. Capello[2]

Abstract

Although research scholarship offers valuable guidance to those hoping to use improvement science in their teaching and practice, it tends to center the perspectives of researchers and EdD program faculty. Less research has focused on the voices of practitioners who use improvement science in their schools and organizations. We draw on sensemaking theory to investigate how EdD students are learning about and applying improvement science in their practice. We share how practitioners made sense of each stage of the improvement science process, including affordances, and how they navigated challenges with collaborators and communities within their organizations.

Keywords

improvement science, EdD students, K-12 leaders, EdD programs, sensemaking

Pillar I: Practitioner Inquiry (PI) Sequence

Year 1 Benchmark I Defining a problem, inquiring into how the system contributes to that problem	**Leadership as Inquiry**. Students engage in informal inquiry to define and understand their problem of practice.
	Data Collection. Students learn about mixed methods research design, surveys, interviews, and ethical inquiry.
Year 2 Benchmark II Developing a theory of improvement and corresponding measurement system	**Data Analysis.** Students learn methods of quantitative and qualitative data analysis.
	Developing & Evaluating Change. Students learn how to review the research to collaboratively develop theories of improvement, change ideas, and practical measures.
Year 3 Benchmark III Engage in iterative cycles of acting, assessing, adjusting, and spreading change	**Practicum**. Students are provided differentiated support and feedback as they apply the knowledge and skills they have gained in prior practitioner inquiry courses to their ISDiP

Pillar II: Social Justice & Leadership Sequence

Equity and Social Justice in Education (Year 1 Semester 1). Students examine how forces of oppression influence their PoP, engage in an equity audit related to their PoP, and examine how their positionality may shape their assumptions about the problem and inquiry process.

Leadership for Social Justice (Year 2 Semester 1). Students interrogate the ways other leaders center equity and social justice when leading change in their organizations, consider implications for their own ISDiP Projects.

Leadership for Equity and Improvement at Scale (Year 3 Semester 3). Students plan to spread change from their ISDiPs and continuous improvement across their systems, while still maintaining a commitment to user-centeredness and involving those most impacted.

Pillar III: 1-credit Doctoral Research Courses each Semester

Meets for one hour every other week throughout the 3-year program. Each year is led by one faculty member who holds responsibility for ensuring that all students have a solid draft of the benchmark paper for that year.

Year 1
Students are introduced to the expectations and examples of the first benchmark.

Students engage in reflective journaling to document their inquiry process.

Students work iteratively to develop drafts of their first benchmark, incorporating data from ongoing inquiry.

Year 2
Students are provided additional support in interweaving formal research and local analysis of the problem, developing measures, and planning PDSA cycles.

Students are introduced to the expectations and examples of the 2nd benchmark.

Year 3
Students are introduced to the expectations and examples of the third benchmark.

Students work in groups to share learning, provide feedback, and problem-solve.

Evidence of Progress

<u>Our experiences</u>

- There is increasing demand for the program, leading to larger cohorts and stricter admissions requirements.
- The demands of chairing ISDiP committees have been reduced greatly since beginning the 1-credit and PI Sequence, as have the variability of students' dissertations.
- The interdependence generated by the 1-credit sequence has promoted close faculty collaboration around instruction and student outcomes.
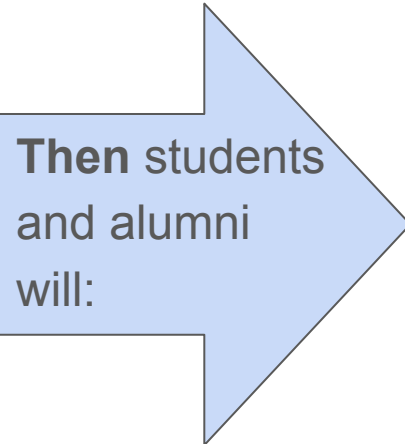
Evidence of Progress

Student Outcomes:

- Our sixth cohort began in January 2026.
- 44 alumni have graduated; 58 students are currently enrolled.
- When asked about their satisfaction with the program (range from 1 = not at all satisfied to 5 = very satisfied), the average score across three survey administrations has been **4.8** (n=88).
- When asked how likely they are to recommend our program to a colleague (1-10), the average score across three survey administrations has been **9.5** (n=88).

As part of our continuous improvement efforts, for the past three years we have administered an annual anonymous survey to understand students' experiences within the program (n = 88).

Our broader theory of change

If our students take coursework on educational leadership, social justice, and practitioner inquiry, with improvement science as a signature pedagogy, *and*

they apply these skills to an ISDiP that focuses on inquiring into and iteratively addressing a problem of practice in their system . . .

Then students and alumni will:

Develop impactful changes through their ISDiP.

Apply and adapt equity-focused improvement science principles in their daily work, *and*

Support the spread of collaborative continuous improvement across their division and region.
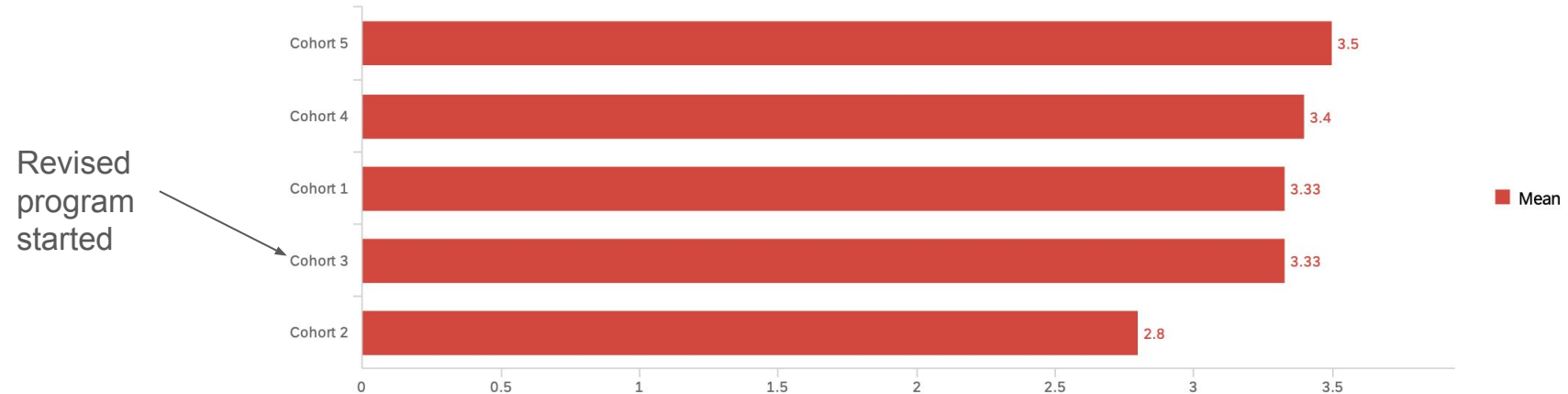
How its going:

Student Outcomes:

Please rate your agreement/disagreement with the following statements: "This EdD program has helped me feel prepared to . . . " (1 = strongly disagree 4 = strongly agree)
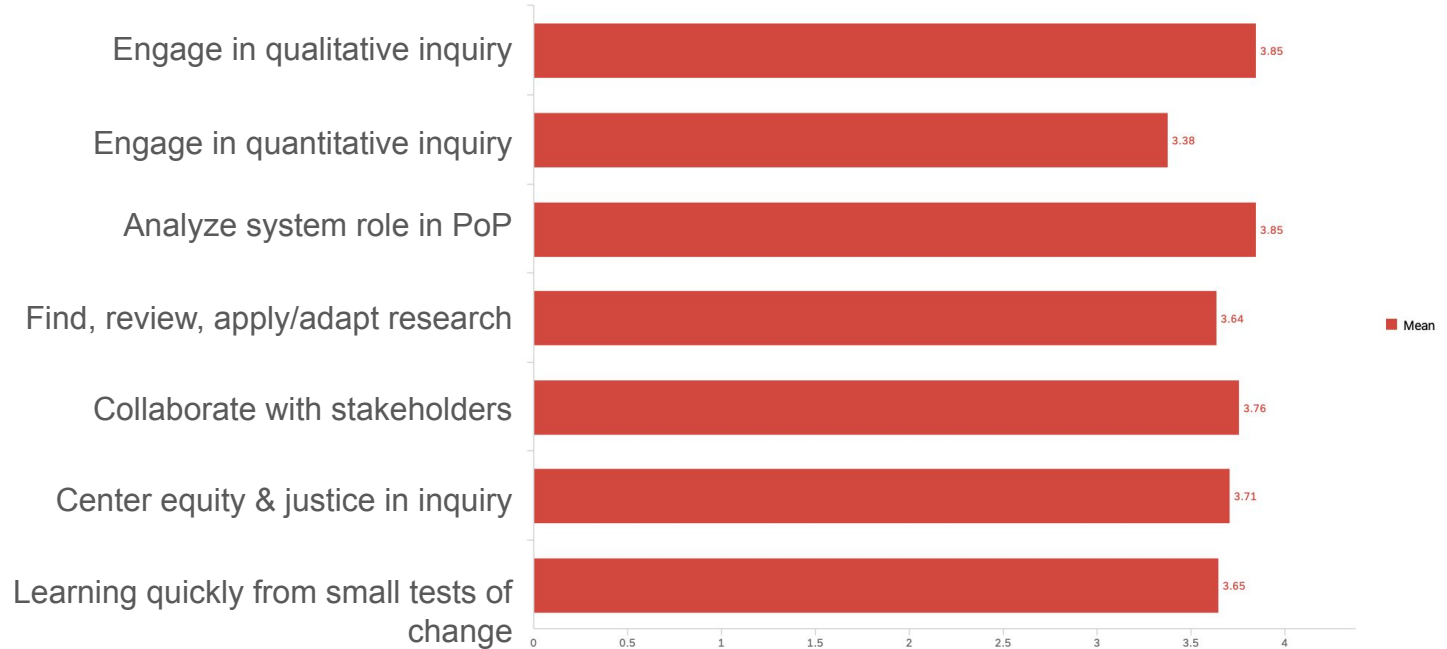
How its going:
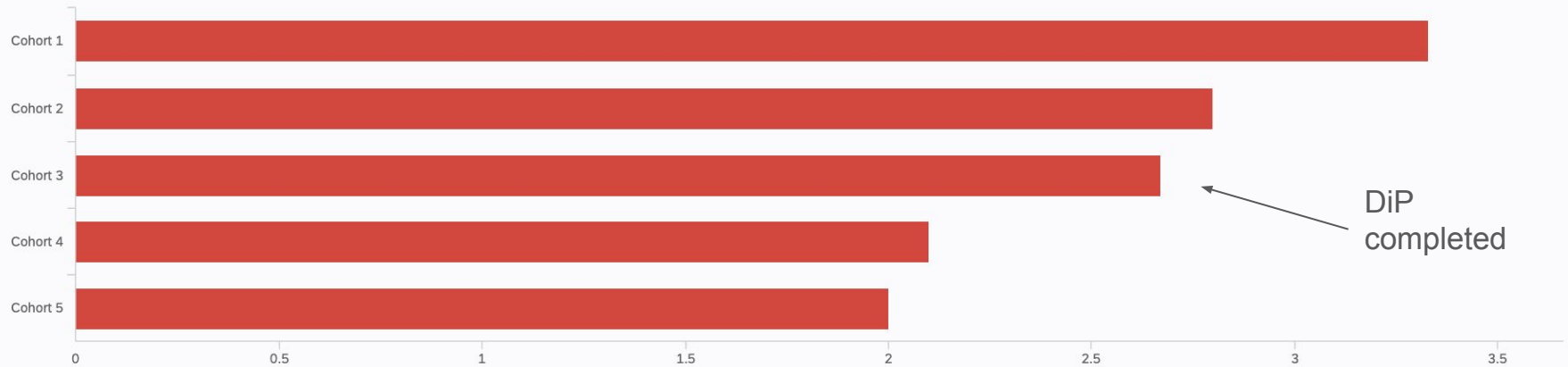
Student Outcomes:

To what extent have you drawn on principles or practices of improvement science in your day-to-day work as an educator or leader? (1 = not at all 4 = to a great extent) (n=33)

Revised program started

How its going:

<u>Student Outcomes:</u>

To what extent has your dissertation project had an impact on your school or system? (1 = not at all 4 = a great extent)?

Study of Radford alumni

16+	13-15	10-12	7-9	4-6	1-3
16+	13-15	10-12	7-9	4-6	1-3

Response to a scenario, reflections on change idea and practice, self-reflection on IS principles and dispositions (Biag & Sherer, 2021; Bryk et al., 2015).

IS principle or disposition	Aligned	Divergent
Problem-specific and user-centered.		
Seeking the **perspective** of others.		
See the **system** that produces the current outcomes.		
Adopting a **learning stance:**		
Possess an orientation toward **action.**		

IS principle or disposition	Aligned	Divergent
We cannot improve at scale what we cannot **measure**.		
Focus on **variation** in performance.		
Anchor practice improvement in **disciplined inquiry.**		
Accelerate improvements through **networked** communities.		
Persisting beyond initial improvement attempts:		

Continued collaboration around CI

63% of students in the first three cohorts have continued to collaborate in some way on improvement science-focused projects (e.g., research, developing improvement communities, presentations, writing projects, etc.).

ImpactingEducation
JOURNAL ON TRANSFORMING PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

The Role of Theory in a Practitioner-Based EdD Program:
A Braided Dialectical Interplay Between Professor and Scholar-Practitioner

Theresa L. Burriss
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Elizabeth Mayers
Radford University
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ABSTRACT

In this exchange between an EdD professor and one of their practitioner-scholars, the two recount their respective and overlapping journeys in Critical Social Theories for Just Schools and Communities. While the professor was trained as a philosopher and has embraced the theoretical throughout her career, the practitioner-scholar enrolled in the class with much skepticism about the usefulness of theories, especially coupled with the word "critical" in our politically divisive society. They share the educational unfolding that occurred for both of them as they navigated various challenges of infusing theory into a practitioner-based educational doctoral program. The professor offers insights into their pedagogical strategies when presenting sometimes contentious topics, and the practitioner-scholar provides an honest unveiling of their self-awareness.

KEYWORDS
critical theories, critical pedagogies, practitioner-based program

ImpactingEducation
JOURNAL ON TRANSFORMING PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

A School Administrator's Journey through an EdD Program in the Midst of a Global Pandemic
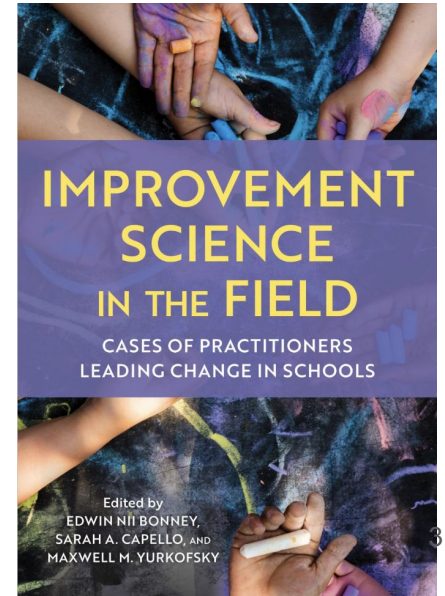
Courtney F. Browning
Radford University
cfbrowning@radford.edu

ABSTRACT

This braided essay weaves together the reflective journey of a school administrator traversing through a doctoral program during the initial stages of the COVID 19 pandemic while considering her Problem of Practice in the current context of her school, local community, and global society. The ongoing challenges of a rural 3rd-5th consolidated school struggling through school improvement to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of all students are examined, while analyzing the place-based education model as it pertains to the current global pandemic and present state of education. While examining the issue of racial discipline disproportionality in the local context, this essay also addresses the potential implications upon both the local school and overall state of education by fostering a strong sense of place within and through the implementation of place-based educational practices.

KEYWORDS
place-based education, COVID-19, school closure, problem of practice, racial disparity

IMPROVEMENT SCIENCE IN THE FIELD

CASES OF PRACTITIONERS LEADING CHANGE IN SCHOOLS

Edited by
EDWIN NII BONNEY,
SARAH A. CAPELLO, AND
MAXWELL M. YURKOFSKY

Next level of work

- Quality is consistent, but the timeline varies.
  - Students are successfully submitting a first draft of their first benchmark by December of their first year.
  - **However,** many are having trouble quickly revising and defending that Benchmark.
  - This slows them down in beginning the second phase of the ISDiP process, and results in **more variation** in terms of where students are in the process, **creating challenges down the road of differentiation.**
- Understanding and applying quantitative methods: still a challenge!
- Can we maintain productive interdependence amidst faculty turnover?

Small Group Reflection

1. What was an idea from the presentation that might be useful or relevant to your own work?

2. What was an idea from the presentation that:
   a. You disagreed with or didn't fully understand?, or
   b. You find interesting but are struggling to apply/adapt for your own context.

3. How does this presentation relate to the work you are already doing in your organization?

4. Any clarifying or probing questions?

Keep in touch!

Feel free to reach out to discuss more! myurkofsky@radford.edu

For pdfs of the resources mentioned today, see the link/QR code below

https://tinyurl.com/RadfordEdD2-28-25

Review of Intended Outcomes

After today's convening, attendees will be able to:

- Articulate how improvement science is being integrated into EdD programs and explain the shift from traditional dissertation models to an Improvement Science Dissertation in Practice (ISDiP)

- Identify common challenges and opportunities in embedding improvement science within EdD programs and consider how similar strategies could be applied in their own institutional contexts

- Explore potential collaborations and next steps to advance the use of improvement science in EdD programs, including opportunities for cross-institutional research, faculty development, and shared resources