

CO-GENERATING A DISSERTATION: Camaraderie, SEL Competencies, and the Cohort Community

Abstract

Background: A doctoral program need not be an individualistic and isolationist academic endeavor; instead, it should be communal and foster a sense of belonging, appealing to the hearts and minds of adult learners. My experience in a Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning (SEAL) doctoral program unearthed these discoveries.

Purpose: This article aims to inform and inspire doctoral students and programs to intentionally embrace community and collective wisdom.

Methodology/Approach: The approach is a reflective narrative using storytelling and first-hand examples from a scholar-practitioner's recent doctoral program completion. Through a participatory lens, I gathered qualitative data from conversation, inquiry, and observation.

Findings/Conclusions: The hybrid cohort model is a lever for building community and fostering friendship and social capital ties among an intergenerational group of adult learners with varied degrees of professional and lived experiences. It may serve as one remedy for the social isolation epidemic.

Implications: Creating a community of care at the outset of a doctoral program has the potential to increase program retention, bridge intergenerational relationships, and augment opportunities for co-generating new ideas, conceptual frameworks, and expansive thinking about problems of practice. As a result of this work, doctoral students should think of their programs as compassionate organizations that prioritize empathy, relationships, perspective-taking, and the deep value of collective wisdom. Programs can implement seven best practices, referred to as the seven "I's," to foster greater collaboration and allow for social and emotional expression and development.

Keywords

Collective Wisdom, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Competencies, Trusted Adults

A doctoral program is much more than an individual academic exercise; it is a collective experience. It requires a set of social and emotional competencies to navigate the emotional turbulence and social isolation that adult learners may face. The doctoral coursework and process will test the student's stamina and limits. Students learn to maximize their time, the most precious commodity. They also find compassionate communities and intergenerational solidarity with their classmates and professors to vent, brainstorm, and solicit feedback. The dynamism and camaraderie of the doctoral program can keep a student invested for the long haul. Setting aside research skills, the earned and learned social and emotional learning (SEL) skill set is the most vital lesson gained throughout the doctoral journey. Humor, sunrise work blocks, self-talk during long walks, and the collective wisdom of my cohort community were the coping and grounding

mechanisms that helped me reach the dissertation defense, the point of no return.

COLLECTIVE WISDOM AND THE COHORT COMMUNITY

For the past three and a half years, I have been a student in a one-of-a-kind, cohort-based Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning (SEAL)-focused Doctor of Education program at Sacred Heart University in Connecticut. Throughout the journey, I discovered that the doctoral and dissertation experience is much more than an individualistic and personal academic endeavor; it is the formation of bonds with classmates and professors who challenge your thinking, push your perspective, substantiate your work, and share a passion for the topics with which you are invested and hold emotional ties. My twenty-four classmates, numerous professors, and dissertation chair have formed a community of SEAL experts from whom I can draw fresh ideas and grapple with palpable and relatable problems plaguing

schools and districts. Together, we have learned new concepts and acquired tools for our research and practice, including, but not limited to, neuroscience breakthroughs that impact teaching and learning, a Black SEL Framework, and a storyboarding approach to curriculum development (Jacobs & Zmuda, 2023; *Our Framework - Blacksel*, 2024). Our past and current academic and practical experiences combined to form a unique reservoir of collective wisdom

The collective wisdom reservoir helped me get to the final stage of this journey: the Dissertation in Practice (DiP). The DiP enables Ed.D. students to address an authentic Problem of Practice (PoP) in their workplace and apply improvement science methodology to test solutions in a cycle of continuous planning, implementation, analysis, and reflection. Hinnant-Crawford (2020) synthesizes the improvement science process as “a methodological framework that is undergirded by foundational principles that guide scholar-practitioners to define problems, understand how the system produces the problems, identify changes to rectify the problems, test the efficacy of those changes, and spread the changes” (p. 29). The iterative and reflexive nature of improvement science played out within our cohort, beyond the borders of our problems of practice and workplaces. Due to this process and collective wisdom, I created a new conceptual framework and a suite of tools to enhance and advance the training and preparation of school-based staff as trusted adults in high schools.

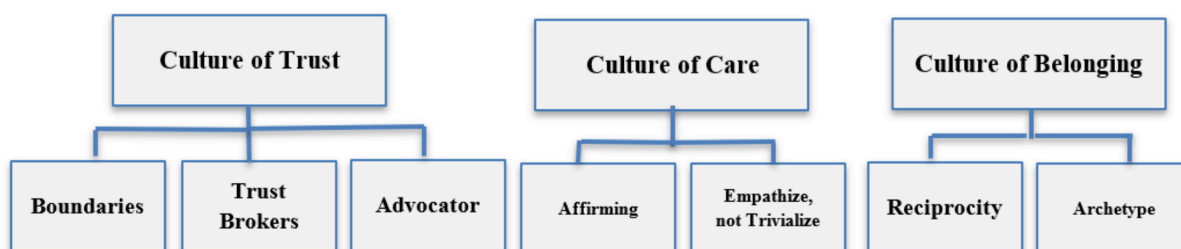
As a fiercely independent and professionally seasoned human being, I discovered and embraced a beautifully unexpected aspect of the program: the experience of belonging that comes with the communal cohort structure. I found that ruminating on roadblocks or facing defeat and fatigue alone was far too isolating in this journey. Further, perspective-taking and criticality of current social justice issues could not be accomplished from my singular positionality. Moreover, the emotions that percolated from frustrations over an onslaught of whiplash policy upheavals that shook the education and nonprofit sectors were deeply unpleasant and challenging to navigate and manage on one’s own. Therefore, I seized every opportunity to connect with a classmate over the phone, linger in a group project on Zoom, chat back and forth on a discussion board, and share tea or a meal with cohort members during in-person residencies. These small moments of connection have formed a collective container of generosity and wisdom that I drew on

as I wrote dissertation chapters and prepared for a dissertation defense.

Our collective wisdom derives from my talented and empathetic classmates, who represent various roles, including teachers from across disciplines, mental health professionals, and district administrators. The intergenerational group also brings a wealth of personal experiences, contributing to a bank of tappable expertise that includes a sports coach, musician, pastry chef, business owner, and numerous caregivers for individuals of all ages, from birth to aging parents. My cohorts’ multidimensional perspectives as “trusted adults” helped me expand my thinking about my problem of practice, specifically cultivating better trusted adults in high school settings, to improve school safety. For instance, I was asked if I considered the sense of fear and mistrust students from vulnerable populations may feel from authoritative figures due to the political climate and the cultural and racial mismatch that often exists between high school students and their teachers. The diversity in perspectives within the reservoir of collective wisdom has helped me design a better research study and produce impactful results that will reach a large cross-section of educators.

From my experience as an urban high school teacher and working in the nonprofit space at Big Brothers Big Sisters of New York City and Sandy Hook Promise, I was eager to research the topic of “trusted adults” because of their proximity to mentors, their role as a buffer against school violence, lever for school connectedness, and their potency as protective factors for adolescents (Bottiani et al., 2016; Hurd et al., 2018; Meltzer et al., 2016). Despite my interest, the problem of practice and root cause analysis was hazy and difficult to grasp and articulate. In weekly virtual meetings, my group members and chairperson helped to refine my topic and problem of practice. I was teaching the group that trusted adults are a school safety lever that is both undervalued and under-theorized in research. At the same time, they became invested in my work. They continually asked clarifying questions to ensure I had the literature to support my position and a rationale that underscored the importance of trusted adults to people outside our small group. To elucidate the power of my cohort’s collective wisdom, they provided feedback on my dissertation proposal and defense presentations. I felt safe within my group to express



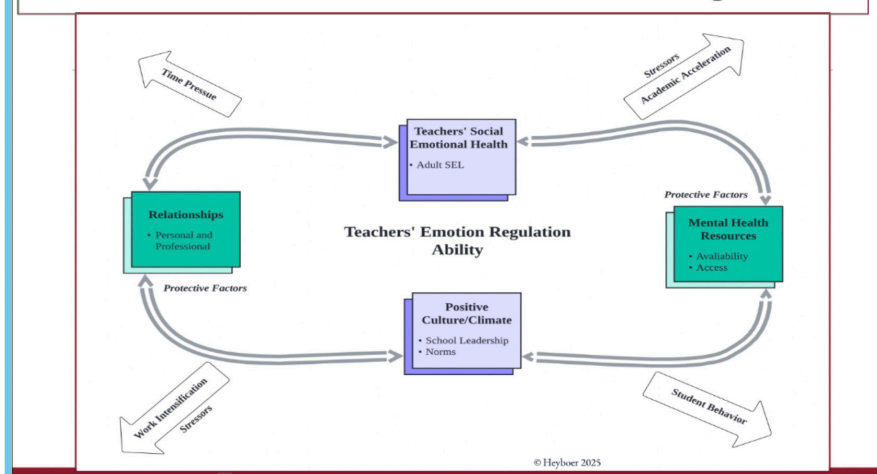
FIGURE 1*A Conceptual Framework of Trusted Adult Relationships*

authenticity and humor, never feeling the need to be defensive about my work. They challenged a new conceptual framework on trusted adult relationships and encouraged me to have confidence in my methodologies and framework (see Figure 1). Derived from qualitative research, including focus groups and design-based activities, the new framework captures the primary themes and subthemes that interplay to cultivate better trusted adults in high school settings. While this framework was emerging from the data, my own cohort of trustworthy adults had constructed a community based on a culture of trust, care, and belonging.

The scholar-practitioners who comprised my tightknit group were closely connected by a steadfast desire to advance SEL practice and literature. Through the improvement science process, our group members challenged collective thinking about our varied problems of practice. Initially, I framed my problem of practice more myopically, seeking to understand the phenomenological qualities and characteristics that comprise a trustworthy adult figure in a school setting. However, this more unilateral, one-dimensional thinking did not expand on

the dynamism of trusted adults in high school settings or give credence to the symbiotic nature and intricacies that contribute to a level of trust between adolescent students and often racially and generationally mismatched school staff, creating safer and more connected schools. If it were not for my dissertation cohort, I would have abandoned or glossed over a term central to my study, “trust brokers,” or the classmates and adult colleagues who serve as trustworthy intermediaries and the voices and gatekeepers who help keep school communities safe (Champagne, 2025).

Our community fostered and generated creative energy, another benefit to working within a cohort structure. As an example, our colleague Heyboer (2025) proposed a new conceptual framework based on a DiP mindfulness intervention (see Figure 2). The scholar-practitioner was able to test and iterate on the concept with our group in a safe, honest space.

FIGURE 2**The Rubber Band Framework for Teacher Emotion Regulation**

Note. Reprinted from *Teaching on the Edge of the Snap: Exploring the Constraints and Capacities of Emotion Regulation*, by Kate Heyboer, 2025, Doctoral dissertation, Sacred Heart University. (<https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/edd/72/>). Copyright 2025 by Kate Heyboer. Reprinted with permission.

The group validated and championed our teammate's ingenuity and generated a range of ways to implement the new framework in schools to raise awareness of the stressors educators face and the protective factors that can prevent them from "snapping" or "burning out." Creativity flourished in the intertwined cohort structure.

Through the bonding process, my cohort has also become its own alert circle, a term used for elder elephants who come together in community to surround and protect their young calves in the wake of danger (Whisnant, , 2025). We surround one another to celebrate, redirect, and caution against possible pitfalls and hurdles. We also share research articles and stories that provoke fresh perspective-taking. My small dissertation cohort and chairperson form an alert circle that anticipates the "dangers." When we disperse from a weekly meeting or class, there is a mutual understanding that we are only a group text or email away for support. Our group often texts each other funny GIFs to celebrate a win, schedules a virtual meeting to practice a presentation, or shares a pertinent article featuring timely and relevant research. The cohort's supportive network parallels what I sought to replicate in my study, a close-knit group of educators striving to create a community of care and trust. Anyone embarking on a doctoral program should seek to develop a community of classmates and professors and form their own alert circle for when dissertation self-doubt or fatigue inevitably sets in.

Ultimately, the dissertation work should not be done in isolation, yet a healthy and supportive cohort community does not always emerge organically. Therefore, I offer advice to current and future Ph.D. and Ed.D. students to intentionally curate moments for connection with classmates and professors. Within the Sacred Heart University (SHU) Education Leadership Doctoral Program structure, opportunities for connection are facilitated through in-person summer residencies, a research symposium, student-created chat groups, and group assignments that foster interaction. Intentional interactions and the emergence of an unexpected community amid an isolation epidemic revived my spirit and my long-term investment in creating educational spaces where empathy and healing are the heart center.

Doctoral programs can learn from the SHU program's best practices and build on what has been both organically and intentionally nurtured with my cohort.

Doctoral programs should structure the academic program around the SEL competencies, primarily self-regulation, relationship-building, and social awareness, and cultivate a community of compassion and care at the program's onset to ensure retention, bolster the concept of collective wisdom, and boost the likelihood of feelings of belonging. The blend of online and limited in-person courses and summer events strikes the right balance for full-time educator-professionals to flexibly do the bulk of the work online while also gaining a deeper understanding of the collective group's immense contributions through in-person presentations, research symposiums, local conferences, and meal-sharing.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES FOR A SUCCESSFUL DOCTORAL PROGRAM EXPERIENCE

The SEAL doctoral program is a holistic social and emotional learning experience. My dissertation group, which comprises four educators and one advisor, has practiced and parroted the social skills and emotional intelligence inherent in our improvement science studies as we aim to improve cultures and climates through SEL interventions. In sum, we intentionally and unintentionally applied the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) competencies to our study problems of practice as well as our individual and collective program and research journeys. The SEL competencies include self-awareness, which consists of a sense of self-efficacy and healthy identity formation; self-management, which provides for emotion regulation; social awareness, which involves perspective-taking and empathy; responsible decision-making, which ushers open-mindedness and curiosity; and relationship skills, which encompass everything from respectful communication to being supportive that aid in feelings of belonging and bonding (Casel's Sel Framework, n.d.). Cipriano et al. (2023) conducted a meta-analysis of universal school-based (USB) SEL interventions, demonstrating that the inclusion and implementation of SEL significantly improved school climate and safety, civic attitudes and beliefs, prosocial behaviors, emotional distress, externalizing behaviors, school functioning, and academic achievement (p. 13).

In essence, each of us is also our own SEL improvement science project. At different inflection points, resilience and social skills, such as endurance, hope, and connection, were essential





for sustaining the diligence and work ethic necessary to balance compassion-centric full-time jobs in the education and nonprofit sectors while pursuing academic coursework. Additionally, as my dissertation group navigated processes such as Internal Review Board (IRB) applications, we employed emotional strategies and coping skills, including practicing mindful breathing and engaging in self-care routines, to reduce stress, which were also incorporated into several of our interventions. Through the mirrored experiences, we had moments of joy, celebration, and frustration, which were relatable and palpable because we were collectively going through the DiP stages. As we learned and studied effective SEL practices and programs and applied research-based practices in our schools and programs, we improved and adapted our own SEL competencies, both individually and collectively. Our group became a *collaboratory*, or a combination of collaboration and laboratory “without walls,” in which group members from New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and New Mexico could leverage technology to network and share resources (Wulf, 1993). Our group co-created this SEL laboratory, or collaboratory, utilizing iterative processes of discovery, prototype ideation, and evaluation to define, refine, and implement SEL-based interventions.

In an unexpected turn, I also discovered that the progression of the dissertation mirrored my cohort’s in-group experience. My classmates and I were not simply taking classes together and posting on Blackboard discussion threads; we were constructing the unique experience as a connected community using blended concepts of *acompañamiento* and co-generative dialogues (Emdin, 2016; Sepúlveda Iii, 2011). *Acompañamiento* implies that we accompany each other, students and professors alike, on our SEL and academic journey, rather than pursue individualized paths that never intersect or interact. Co-generative suggests that we co-design the experience together, creating our own guidelines, norms, and ways of producing work as we go. For example, my small group co-created a peer debriefing rubric and process through a co-generative dialogue to address the need for an additional measure of reliability and validity, a unique approach that other DiP groups did not co-construct. Assuredly, the group processes were social and emotional, mirroring the dissertation interventions we are implementing with participants in professional learning sessions and focus groups with students and educators.

IMPLICATIONS

The reflection and findings offer concrete suggestions for cultivating collective wisdom and community, as well as infusing social and emotional competency practice and skills in any doctoral program. I have framed these suggestions as the seven “I’s.”

1. Implement a regular peer debriefing protocol to present research findings and hear group feedback (Hail et al., 2011; Spall, 1998).
2. Identify one social and emotional competency that the group will focus on each meeting time or semester. For example, focus on self-awareness and institute an emotion check-in and mindfulness practice and procedure using a tool like the mood meter. As another example, for social awareness, conduct a perspective-taking exercise to understand what makes each individual feel valued, seen, and heard within the group.
3. Iterate on problems of practice and research activities together.
4. Institute small moments for fun and laughter. Virtual tea-and-talks, in-person game nights, and routine icebreakers that evoke humor are a few examples.
5. Invest in the intergenerational and diverse wisdom of the group and intentionally discuss different perspectives on the problems of practice.
6. Invite guests to your group to listen to simulated presentations or offer a fresh perspective on the problems of practice and viable solutions.
7. Identify communication tools that allow for a collaboratory to flourish. Our cohort used WhatsApp, Google Docs, Google Meets, Microsoft Teams, and texting. We also explored time-saving software together, like Zotero and NVivo.

Regular and routine implementation of the seven “I’s” offers a blueprint for doctoral programs to bolster the concepts of collective work and community and place SEL at the forefront, allowing students and faculty to apply and develop social and emotional learning competencies.



CONCLUSION

New and prospective doctoral students may be allured by a program that promotes the co-creation of a community of care and emphasizes SEL skill development and practices across doctoral disciplines, especially in times of social upheaval and polarization. The purposeful construction of compassionate organizations that prioritize relationship-building not only amongst Ph.D. and Ed.D. students, but also students and professors, is inviting to those craving not only intellectual stimulation and career advancement, but also human connection. A focus on relationships and respect adds longevity to a program as well. For instance, my cohort members continue to support and celebrate classmates who complete the dissertation defense and gain job promotions. Therefore, to foster a community of care steeped in SEL competencies at the outset, doctoral programs should consider introducing and unpacking the seven “I’s” as a group, reframing and personalizing each “I” to meet the needs of the specific doctoral community, and producing a community agreement using the “I’s” to revisit over the program’s course to ensure accountability and uphold a commitment to a community of care.

Overall, due to a commitment to community-building and our own social and emotional well-being, our cohort stayed unified against social and political injustices and co-constructed ideas and solutions to address the backlash against the topic we are passionate about, SEL. We accompanied each other, side by side, as we stumbled or stalled in the research process, fueling one another with SEL tips and strategies to stay the course and complete our goals. The group affirmed each other for the research that will make a dent and a difference in the lives of educators and students. We helped and championed one another as we refined presentations and adjusted measures to capture participants’ perceptions of SEL topics accurately. Ultimately, we unknowingly designed an SEL think tank through the improvement science process, allowing us to apply our own SEL skills while simultaneously innovating SEL interventions to improve the PoP. We co-generated a doctoral community steeped in camaraderie, belonging, joy, and a passion for SEAL, and I encourage all students and programs to be emboldened to replicate this model and place community, care, and social and emotional health and growth at the forefront of the doctoral experience.

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