ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, INDICATORS OF SUCCESS IN THE BLENDED DOCTORAL COHORT MODEL, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in the School of Education, Concordia University Irvine.

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INDICATORS OF SUCCESS IN THE BLENDED DOCTORAL COHORT MODEL

by

Susan K. Norton

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ABSTRACT

For decades, the cohort model has been utilized to bring graduate degrees to working adults who cannot put their family lives and careers on hold to attend a university in the more traditional way. With the growing access to reliable digital tools, some cohorts have taken advantage of the ability to meet online with live-streaming applications such as Skype, GoToMeeting, and Adobe Connect. The blending of online instruction and face-to-face interaction has given birth to blended learning, a hybrid of synchronous and asynchronous learning. With this evolution of curriculum and instruction delivery, questions arise regarding the quality of graduate programs. Are the students who are investing time and money into these graduate degrees receiving the high-level of quality that they would expect if they were attending the university in a traditional way? How are they interacting with their peers in a scholarly fashion? How are the professors engaging the students in meaningful and scholarly ways? How do students and institutions know what is working for the success of the student and what needs to be improved? This study sought to uncover answers to some of these questions as it researched 16 doctoral students in one blended cohort in central California. With primarily qualitative methods, the study attempted to describe the phenomenon that is the blended doctoral cohort, specifically researching the participants' perspective of themselves and the blended cohort model at the beginning of their program and, again, at the end of their program.

Keywords: *cohort model, blended learning, hybrid cohort, blended cohort, asynchronous, synchronous, distance learning, social learning theory, transformational theory, community of inquiry (CoI), community of practice (CoP), andragogy, adult learning theory*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

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When I started my doctoral program, the Lord inspired me with His word in Isaiah 64:8: "Yet you, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand." As I come to the end, I will carry these words in my heart forever: "Let all that I am praise the Lord; may I never forget the good things he does for me" Psalm 103:2.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

In January 2014, the administration at Concordia University, Irvine, a private, Lutheran university in Orange County, California, gathered together the inaugural doctoral cohort of 16 members who were seeking a doctoral degree in educational leadership (EDD). The program was advertised as a blended program which meant that students would meet and learn via a mixture of traditional face-to-face classes, synchronous online classes in which the students all logged in to a chat-room style environment, and asynchronous classes in which students completed modules, assigned reading, and scholarly writing from their own computers on their own time.

In addition to the 10 prescribed courses, students were placed on a *dissertation track* where they met in small online groups to discuss with professors the dissertation process. Having recently earned a master's degree in education through an online program, I drew on my experience and interest in educational technology and began to define my research topic and questions. I focused my scholarly research on the pros and cons of a blended program, the strengths and the theory behind the cohort model for higher education, and the areas of growth and need for further research in the area of the blended cohort model. In essence, I wished to research the type of program I was experiencing to gain a deeper understanding of what theories supported the blended cohort model and to uncover what methods were good and what methods needed adjustment for the success of the student and the program.

Statement of the Problem, Purpose of the Study, Research Questions

The primary goal of this study was to test the research questions that related to the indicators of success for a blended cohort at the doctoral level. Specifically, this research

investigated the experiences of individual cohort members, the perceptions of the cohort as a whole group, and the learners' perceptions of the doctoral program that delivered instruction through the blended cohort model. Because of the technological emphasis of the blended program, a significant secondary research question focused on the relationship between perceived technological skills at the beginning of the program to the perceptions of students' technological skills at the end of the program.

2. Did the students believe they had the necessary technological skills at the beginning of the program and did they believe that was an accurate assessment at the end of the program? Another secondary research question was:

3. Were learners transformed from practitioners to researchers through the blended cohort model and how did the cohort social structure support that transformation?

Significance of the Study

This study was significant and timely because of the dramatic and dynamic force of the blended cohort and how it has impacted higher education. Universities have been excited to attract new students, and the profession of education remains committed to teacher/leader improvement through higher education. Some universities have even transitioned entirely to blended class offerings, instead of offering a face-to-face option or an online option (Korr, Derwin, Greene, & Skoloff, 2012). Stewart, Harlow, and DeBacco (2011) suggested technologies such as those in blended learning models offer solutions to logistical problems of distance learning. Good and exciting changes are opening up the world of higher education to more students than ever before, particularly through the use of the blended cohort. However, universities must beware that they cannot simply repackage traditional coursework and instructional design and slap an *online label* on old-school methods (Campbell, 2015; Monteiro,

Leite, & Lima, 2013; Power & Vaughan, 2010). To this effort, academic leaders such as Campbell (2015) promoted the importance of instructional design and designers who engage in scholarship while carefully bringing together academic communities over large distances.

Definition of Terms

Adult learning theory – Andragogy: Theory by Malcom S. Knowles (1984) that examines the art and science of how adults learn, in contrast to traditional pedagogy.

Asynchronous: Online work/communications that does not occur at the same time - students complete independently and turn in digitally, without having to log on at the same time – i.e. discussion forums (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008).

Authentic tasks: Projects and assessments that are meant to engage students in meaningful real-life contexts and require the application and production of knowledge (Knowles, 1984).

Collaborative model: A learning model in which participants network, communicate, and cooperate by sharing responsibility, information, and resources (Peacock, Robertson, Clausen & Williams, 2009).

Collective capacity: Culture of interdependence, collaboration, and collective effort among individuals to drive system-wide improvement (Fullan, 2010).

Community of Inquiry (CoI): Instructional framework that focuses on three necessary elements: social presence, teaching presence; and cognitive presence (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008).

Community of Practice (CoP): Part of situated learning theory, formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Distance learning: A way of learning remotely without having to be in regular face-to-face contact with a teacher in the classroom (Stewart et al., 2011).

Hybrid (synchronous and asynchronous): A blend of lessons and assessments that are both synchronous, completed in a live digital setting like Adobe Connect, and asynchronous, online but not necessarily live (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008).

Intellectual capital: The value of an organization's employee knowledge, business training and experience (Fullan, 2010).

Learning community: A group of people who share common academic goals and attitudes, who collaborate semi-regularly, either online or face-to-face (Maher, 2005).

Lock-step curriculum: A curriculum progression, regularly employed for the cohort model, where students take one class at a time as prescribed by the institution and learners progress at the same pace (Maher, 2005).

Satellite campuses: University meeting sites that are not actually on the main university campus (Korr et al., 2012).

Situated learning theory: Constructivist theory by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) that focusses on learning by doing, and on addressing real, rather than theoretical, problems.

Social learning theory: Theory by Albert Bandura (1977) that maintains that most behavior is learned through observation and modeling.

Synchronous: Work/communication that occurs in real time, at the same time – this may be online with streaming video like Skype or Adobe Connect, or face-to-face in a classroom (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008).

Transformative learning theory: Constructivist theory by Mezirow and Taylor (2009) that focuses on adult learning through task-oriented problem solving and reflection of the learning process.

Theoretical Framework

In a cohort-based graduate program, students begin the program together, take the same courses at the same time, and, barring any credit recovery or attrition, graduate together (Tisdell, et al., 2004). Much scholarly research has focused on the graduate cohort as an efficient delivery system for a graduate program. Previously studied indicators for success of the cohort model were grounded in Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory and Mezirow and Taylor's (2009) Transformational Theory.

Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) supported the cohort model for its creation of a community of inquiry and the social support systems that arose out of cohort relationships. Transformational Theory (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009) also leaned on social relationships but factored in experience, critical personal reflection, and an emphasis of changed personal or professional identity over the mere acquisition of skills and knowledge. Leaning on the theory supporting cohort success while introducing the flexibility of online instruction, a blended cohort program employs asynchronous and synchronous instruction through face-to-face and online modules. Both social learning and transformational theories rely on engaging authentic tasks as the core for dynamic learning.

Moving the cohort model into the 21st-century world of e-learning, distance learning, or blended learning requires more scholarly inquiry about what it takes to be a successful educational model as the global learning environment evolves. Quality, relevance, and value are particularly important as graduate students invest tens of thousands of dollars in the pursuit of a

higher degree. Many studies have focused on the technological, content, and service aspects of a graduate program, but all emphasized quality as a significant factor. Yener (2013) reported, "Only a few have examined the quality of e-learning from the learner's perspective" (p. 50). The learner's perspective of the program connects to the quality of the learning and the value of the degree.

Limitations, Delimitations, and Ethical Issues

There were limitations to the data collection procedures for the qualitative portion of the study. Limitations are not under the control of the researcher and are "factors that may have an effect on the interpretation of the findings" (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008, p. 133). One limitation was that the findings of the study could not be generalized to an entire population because the cohort size was small and unique in that all participants worked within the same school district.

Delimitations are "self-imposed boundaries set by the researcher on the purpose and scope of the study" (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008, p. 134). A significant delimitation was that I did not follow the cohort all the way through their dissertation phase because the time and financial resources that it would take would be too great. The delimitation of this one cohort in Central California was utilized because I was granted access by the university administrator and because the group presented a unique look at a group of educational leaders in one common district. Field issues included gaining access to the cohort and effectively, but unobtrusively, recording and storing the data.

There were two main ethical issues with this study. The first had to do with the fact that I was also in a blended cohort within the same university as the cohort of study. Some of the university's faculty discussed with me the idea that I might be pressured to show the university in a glowing light. Removing certain key administrators of the program from the dissertation

team was one way of protecting against interference, and studying a cohort that was from a very different geographical location helped to mitigate that tension.

The second issue centered on my own biases in the same cohort structure and, in fact, the same course of study. My personal biases and anticipated outcomes could have been harmful to the objectivity of the study and the data; however, I felt that I "must not be so concerned about being in control of [my] own personal perspectives" that I would feel "paralyzed to move forward" in the research (Edmonson & Irby, 2008, p. 62). Research reflexivity and carefully acknowledging the author's own perspective and experience within the context of study was pivotal to mitigating this issue. Creswell's (2013) instructions regarding epoche, or bracketing, helped to put my personal experience to use, strengthening the reflexivity and providing a structure for data collection objectivity.

The qualitative analysis of data involved extensive immersion into the details of the data as I coded and categorized, reflected and interpreted. In the analysis, the research began by describing my personal experiences in an attempt to admit, and then set aside, researcher bias while delving deeply into the literature and the theory attached to the phenomenon. A list of significant statements that were accumulated through survey responses (Appendix B) and interview feedback (Appendix C) helped to support the emerging themes. Once a thick description of the *what* and the *how* of the phenomenon was created, I analyzed the details of both the quantitative and qualitative data to reveal the *why* of the study, the significance of the learners' experiences and perceptions for further researchers to study.

Assumptions

Based on the literature and my experience with the blended doctoral cohort, it is anticipated that the factors of success will begin to emerge surrounding three themes:

1. The social relationships between the participants provide emotional and academic support that students perceive as beneficial and instrumental to their success in the program. The community of inquiry (CoI) framework increases their sense of comfort and confidence.
2. The students have a higher perception of academic success when they experience greater interaction with their professors, including consistent feedback and collaborative discussion. When professors do not actively engage with the class, the cohort members look to each other for guidance, instructions, and support.
3. Students who struggle with the technological aspects of the blended delivery rely upon the cohort model for early success but find confidence as their skills transform and improve through regular practice and application. Students who could not adjust to the technological demands of the courses feel isolated from the curriculum and instruction.

Organization of the Study

The structure of the study followed Lunenburg and Irby's (2008) approach to the research dissertation.

- Chapter 1: Introduction, Statement of the Problem and Purpose, and Outline of the Study
- Chapter 2: Review of the Literature and Theoretical Frameworks
- Chapter 3: Methodology – Quantitative & Qualitative Approaches, Descriptions of the Sample and the Instruments, Data Collection & Analysis
- Chapter 4: Findings - Presentation of the Study's Findings including Epoche, Tables, Quotes, Themes
- Chapter 5: Summary, Discussion, Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The word *cohort* has been used to identify groups in medical trials and research for decades. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the noun *cohort* has two meanings: (1) a friend or companion; and (2) a group of people used in a study who have something, such as age or social class, in common. In the last few decades, however, the word has gained new significance as an adjective describing a bourgeoning learning model. The cohort model leans on learning theory and research that supports the philosophy that people learn better when they work collaboratively, building encouraging and lasting relationships with a common goal of program completion (Blackley & Sheffield, 2015; Halloway & Alexandre, 2012; Ward, 2014).

Because of significant advances in technology, the flexibility engendered by the cohort model, and increased efforts to open avenues for higher education to greater populations, the cohort model has become extremely attractive for graduate study. Consequently, the model itself has become a topic for empirical research and case study; however, because the technologies employed by graduate cohorts are changing and advancing so quickly, relevant data on the quality of the program and the perceptions of the students and faculty who experience the program is needed. Issues such as cohort member readiness, faculty readiness, curriculum relevance, assessment quality, and program stability and flexibility can be examined as indicators for individual, cohort, and program success.

The following review of the literature pertained to the research study on indicators for cohort success, namely, the learning theories that support the cohort model, the history of the graduate cohort model, the evolution to the blended cohort, and the problems that are created when students, professors, and institutions do not have the necessary readiness for a successful

blended cohort. Specifically, Chapter 2 is organized into eight sections: (1) Adult Learning Theory, (2) Social and Transformational Learning Theory, (3) Situated Learning Theory, (4) graduate cohort models, past and present, (5) e-learning and blended learning, (6) adult learning in the blended doctoral cohort, (7) the challenge of blended learning readiness, and (8) recent university conversions to blended learning. The researcher studied these theories, frameworks, and models by utilizing the EBSCO database provided by the institution. Specifically, terms that were searched included the following: cohort model, blended doctoral cohort, blended learning, andragogy, social learning theory, transformational learning theory, doctoral students, success at the doctoral level, doctoral program, e-learning, distance learning, hybrid higher education, situated learning theory, community of practice, and community of inquiry.

Adult Learning Theory–Andragogy

Soon after Bandura (1977) published his findings about Social Learning Theory, educator Knowles (1984) began publishing his findings about andragogy or adult learning. The term pedagogy is defined as the method and practice of teaching, and the root "ped" refers to the teaching or leading of children. In contrast, the Greek roots of the term andragogy roughly translate to leader of man, leader of adults. While there are similarities in how children and adults learn, researchers and writers highlight how adult learners are different. For example, one researcher began her examination of Knowles' model writing, "Adult learners need to know why they are learning new knowledge before they are willing to participate" (McGrath, 2009, p. 99). This differed from a traditional pedagogical assumption that students would learn because it was required and because their teachers would tell them what they would learn. In other words, it was the teacher's job to fill the minds of the students. Knowles (1979) suggested, however, adult

learners did not passively accept this transfer of power. They wanted to know why they were learning, what they would be learning, and what benefits would follow.

According to Kenner and Weinerman (2011), much of Knowles' (1984) framework derived from the organizational development field in which employers were seeking strategies for providing effective and purposeful professional development for their employees. New learning models were created to train adult workers because organizational development practitioners found that the traditional higher education models did not function well in the workplace environment. The methods that were used to teach children, teenagers, and even young adults were inefficient and they were criticized by adults who felt disrespected by being treated like a child. Knowles (1979) saw that new models of instruction could more effectively support adult learners not only in the workplace but also in the areas of academia; he also recognized that traditional teachers would need to acquire new skills that would shift them to the role of learning facilitator.

When Knowles (1979) discussed adult learners, he generally identified adult learners as men and women who returned to formal education after spending several years away; however, this did not necessarily include the pursuit of higher education. Some claims of andragogy may not satisfy the theoretical demands of a doctoral program (Crawford, 2004). For example, the theoretical foundations for scholarly research may demand a more traditional teacher-student transfer of knowledge. However, the principles of andragogy, especially the principles that connected to Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), still applied to higher education because the connection of theory and framework may have resulted in a more motivated student. When institutions and teachers created the learner-centered environment, adult students felt a sense of *belonging* where both academic and personal issues could be shared and discussed (McGrath,

2009). Therefore, one major shift of the framework was that instruction and practice would be learner-centered instead of teacher-centered, leaning heavily on both Social Learning Theory and Transformational Theory to effectively teach, encourage, and motivate adult learners (Blackley & Sheffield, 2015).

In his work, Knowles (1979) claimed that the assumptions educators make about adult learners should differ from the assumptions made about children and their learning. In addition, Knowles believed andragogy qualified as its own art and science that could lead a knowledge-based society into and through the 21st century. In particular, higher education instructors needed to realize that adult learners differed from the traditional college student who immediately attended university after high school (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011), and the institutions needed to purposely equip the faculty with new teaching methods. Knowles (1984) grounded his claims and ideas in five assumptions: (1) Self-concept of the adult learner; (2) Adult learner prior experience; (3) Adult learner readiness to learn; (4) Adult orientation to learning; and (5) Adult motivation to learn.

Self-concept. Knowles' (1984) first assumption was that an adult person's self-concept shifted from dependency on others, such as adults and teachers, to mature independence and increased self-directedness. Self-directedness led to one of Knowles' principles that instruction should be imbued with student-centered discovery and experience instead of the traditional lecture style (Pappas, 2013). In this assumption and principle, adult learners are self-directed and take responsibility for their own actions. The shift of self-concept leads to "autonomy over the four T's: their task, their time, their technique, and their team" (Pink, 2009, p. 94). Students do not need to be coaxed by their instructors with the proverbial carrot; nor do they appreciate being forced with the proverbial stick.

Adult learner experience. Knowles' (1984) second assumption was that adult learners brought with them a reservoir of real-life experience that could be tapped as a resource for learning. Embedded in this assumption, Denny (2017) echoed the idea that learning is a journey, not a destination. In addition, adult students came to educational activity with a greater volume of experience and a greater quality of real-life application than younger, more traditional students (Crawford, 2004). Knowles' modern assumption associated an adult's experience with a desire for further professional development. To combat becoming professional obsolete, Knowles (1979) promoted lifelong learning and systematic professional development that could be accessed with rapidly changing technology and societal conditions.

While adult learners are motivated to advance academically and professionally, they view new learning through the lens of applying it to real-life experience. Similarly, they want to apply their experience to the curriculum so that they can understand the material being discussed in the session. This assumption linked to one of Knowles' principles which acknowledged that experience, including mistakes, should provide the basis for learning activities (Pappas, 2013). They want to be responsible for their own learning by linking their self-directness to their deep well of experience. This leads an adult learner to feel a sense of relevance and pragmatism, connecting what they are learning to why they are learning (Sogunro, 2015). However, when the learner is prevented from connecting the learning to real-life experience, and the teacher forces his/her ideals on the learner without establishing purpose and application, adults may resent the process and reject the learning entirely (McGrath, 2009). Instead, the benefit of the learning is recognized in the enrichment of prior and current experience, and the foreseen benefit for future experience. For the adult learner to engage, the curriculum needs to clarify the learner goals,

encourage insightful application, and provide interactive activities that reflect relevant circumstances (Giannoukos, Besas, Galiropoulos, & Hioctour, 2015).

Readiness to learn. Knowles (1979; 1984) assumed that as people matured their readiness to learn was less a product of academic pressure and more a product of what they needed to learn to be successful in the adult workplace. He expanded this assumption to include the necessity of timing learning experiences with task-oriented situations. Crawford (2004) contended that a student's readiness to learn should be supported by an instructor or instructional designer who will create a safe environment where the learner might learn new approaches to relevant tasks. Blackley and Sheffield (2015) extoled the self-directed, experienced learner because they would be less likely to approach new learning with a minimalistic or surface approach; instead, an andragogical model would respond to the learner's readiness with deep personal learning and a developed professional identity.

Orientation to learning. Flowing from the readiness to learn, Knowles' (1984) fourth assumption acknowledged that as a person matured, his/her time perspective or orientation to learning would change from a delayed application of knowledge that is inherent in pedagogical circumstances to an immediacy of application (Pappas, 2013). In addition, adult learners are more problem-centered than subject-centered because real life tends to be more pragmatic and less theoretical (Crawford, 2004). This orientation, or purpose for learning, derives from and boosts the other three characteristics of the adult learner: self-concept, experience, and readiness; however, the significant shift from pedagogy to andragogy relates to time perspective. The young learner had to be subject-centered as he learned his lessons and curriculum, but he had to postpone the application of that learning until he was an independent adult in the workforce. On the other hand, the adult came to an educational activity wanting to immediately apply his

learning, so his time perspective was problem-centered and focused on immediacy of application (Knowles, 1984).

Motivation to learn. The fifth assumption of Knowles' (1984) framework for andragogy dealt with motivation and stated that a mature person is motivated internally, not externally. Wlodkowski (2008) echoed that finding with the idea that a positive attitude toward learning leads to an enhanced and smooth learning process. In Knowles' (1984) assumption, adult learners are intrinsically motivated which may free the instructor from traditional modes of motivation, good or bad grades. In a recent study that presented eight of the top motivating factors for adult learners in higher education, Sogunro (2015) upheld the andragogical framework with his findings. The quality of the instruction and the curriculum, combined with the relevance to meaningful learning and practice, were the first three motivating factors. Interestingly, self-directedness or the learner's autonomy was also listed as one of the top motivating factors. Adult learners tend to place higher priority on internal motivators not only because they are more self-directed but also because they have a more immediate orientation to education. From the perspective of an andragogical framework, adult learners are more in control of why they learn, how they learn, and what they learn (Knowles, 1984). That autonomy results in a powerful intrinsic motivation, the creation of what Pink (2009) would call a Type I personality, a behavior made through experience, not inherent or born. The development of the Type I behavior depended on autonomy, mastery, and purpose. In Knowles' (1984) framework, an adult learner was self-motivated and self-directed for a purpose, pursuing new learning that would lead to a new mastery that could be applied to real-life experience.

Social Learning and Transformational Learning Theories

The cohort model's power derives from collaborative groups and interpersonal relationships as cohort members' experiences facilitate increased feelings of belonging, academic learning, new insights, and learner perseverance (Blackley & Sheffield, 2015; Drago-Severson et al., 2001; McGrath, 2008). Based on Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory, cohort members tend to be self-directed and self-reinforcing as they work independently between class sessions but still model for each other the expected social behaviors and academic standards. Social Learning Theory maintains that most behavior is learned through observation and modeling. Although cohort members and graduate students tend to be independent learners, the socialization that comes with working together as a cohesive, collaborative group, both within each course and in the program at large, is quite fulfilling and appreciated as reported by researchers (Knowles, 1984; Maher, 2005; Nimer, 2009).

One aspect of Social Learning Theory that can encourage and compel cohort members through difficult courses, assignments, and times of personal struggle is the idea that cohort members create a community, or society of learners, that establish the appropriate rules and principles of action (Bandura, 1977). One such rule or principle that establishes commonality and collegiality among cohort members is the notion that all participants will work together for successful completion. Following the Social Learning Theory, universities that have spearheaded the growing cohort model movement in higher education have found specific improvement in retention and specific decrease in attrition by fostering social relationships among its cohort members. Additionally, some research has exposed a lack of socialization as a contributing factor to the near 50% attrition of graduate cohort members (Gardner, 2008). Gardner (2008) specifically looked at the benefits of social learning applications, particularly in

the area of persistence, on underrepresented populations, such as ethnic minorities and women, at the highest levels of graduate study.

To combat the stark attrition rates of graduate cohorts, the University of Antioch deliberately intervened in the doctoral program to foster relationships not only between cohort members but also between the students and faculty (Blackley & Sheffield, 2015; Halloway & Alexandre, 2012; Ward, 2014). The program intentionally embedded strategic ways to build relational bonds among the dozen faculty members. The researchers cited peer mentoring, support groups, and opportunities to interact in social ways among the interventions in place that relied on the ideals of social learning to promote learner success and achievement.

Maher (2005) contended three main social themes arise when studying the benefits of the cohort experience: (1) the meaning and influence of cohort membership; (2) peer relationships; and (3) instructor relationships. The characteristics of shared learning, focused discussion, and increased trust among participants were trademarks of the cohort model and generally supported the benefits of learning communities. Even students who originally believed the cohort membership would have only a modicum of influence on their academic experience soon realized they had underestimated its impact (Maher, 2005). The emotional and social benefits of the cohort model have a strong impact on the perceived success because students feel encouraged, appreciated, and valued by their fellow cohort members and instructors (Drago-Severson et al., 2001). In addition to student perception, members of the faculty also appreciate the satisfying aspects of connectivity and team spirit (Halloway & Alexandre, 2012).

Even in a climate of growing online resources that depend on personal and independent learning competencies, research still supports the integration of social learning. According to Wan, Compeau, and Haggerty (2012), a corporate movement toward self-regulated learning in

order to keep workers up to date with new technologies and skills has been less effective than anticipated and desired. The researchers found that personal, self-regulated learning strategies were more effective when blended with Social Learning Theory strategies that incorporated the formation of group norms and group cooperation (Wan et al., 2012). Additionally, the results indicated, "E-learning providers should promote the use of both types of SRL (self-regulated learning) strategies by drawing employee's attention to the benefits of managing their e-learning processes through their own initiative and by interacting with others" (Wan et al., 2012, p. 332).

Indeed, Social Learning Theory, also referred to as Social Cognitive Theory, has contributed to the advancement of pedagogy by acknowledging the power of collaborative work, collective goals, and collegiate support. The cohort model embraces the social theory ideals as more and more participants report that the model facilitated academic learning, increased feelings of belonging, broadened perspectives, and maintained learner persistence (Drago-Severson et al., 2001; Santicola, 2013). Theories adjacent to Social Learning Theory such as the community of practice, constructivism, and collectivism are also interesting areas to research when analyzing the indicators for success in a graduate cohort. An aspect they have in common is the human drive to work together for shared success toward a challenging and rewarding goal. For instance, cohort members form a community of practice when they engage in the process of collective learning in group projects, field trips, and online discussion (Tomlins-Jahnke, 2013). "Engagement in authentic tasks within the community of practice immerses learners in the domain while they acquire the explicit knowledge of the domain as well as tacit knowledge about its values and behaviors" (Dondlinger & Jones, 2008, p 21). The cohort model fosters this community via authentic tasks, as members work together over time through the program coursework, applying and producing knowledge in meaningful real-life contexts (Dondlinger &

Jones, 2008; Drago-Severson et al., 2005; Engstrom, Santo, & Yost, 2008; Harris & Marx, 2009; Knowles, 1984; Zheng, 2010). Constructivist Learning Theory relies on authentic tasks, real-world projects, and a collaborative social approach as learners link new information to prior knowledge, thus constructing their own realities (Dondlinger & Jones, 2008; Drago-Severson et al., 2005; Engstrom et al., 2008; Harris & Marx, 2009; Knowles, 1984; Zheng, 2010). In this paradigm, learners harness the collective capacity of the group to test new ideas and construct new knowledge.

In addition to social learning, a philosophy that supports the cohort experience is Transformative Learning Theory. Hodge (2014) explains that Transformative Learning Theory can be viewed as a series of signposts that label learners' paths from one identity to another. In the educational doctoral cohort experience, members begin as practitioners of education, either as teachers or administrators, and transform into educational researchers, transcending the practical world of education. According to Rhodes (2013), professional doctoral programs contain members who have strong ties to their profession and employment, and making the transformation from practitioner to researcher is difficult, emotional, and is in some ways alienating. "There is a need to move practitioners beyond the short-term objectives of assimilating the details of particular research methods to the longer-term goal of transformation of one's self and mindset to that of an educational researcher" (Rhodes, 2013, p. 4). Throughout the doctoral cohort experience, learners support each other with social learning mechanisms as they transform beyond what they were and become the scholarly researchers they will be (Provident et al., 2015).

Different from Social Learning Theory that focuses on the process of learning within social norms, groups, and models, Transformative Learning Theory focuses on the changes that

occur as individuals move through an educational program. Beckem and Watkins (2012) revealed that the cohort model's flexibility of delivery and engagement is key to the transformative process. Student-centered learning and increased student engagement through personalized context helps in the transfer of knowledge and therefore the transforming of the student (Beckem & Watkins, 2012; Nimer, 2009; Provident et al., 2015; Rausch & Crawford, 2012; Ward, 2014).

The cohort model can assist learners in the transformation of perspectives and in assuming a new identity. Through the course-by-course model, the cohort becomes a safe place for learners to acquire new skills, model new behaviors, and acclimate to new perspectives on their professional communities and on themselves. Gardner (2008) cited a lack of adequate socialization during the transformative process can lead to isolation, frustration, and, sometimes, failure, particularly for underrepresented populations such as women and minorities. Therefore, integrating both social learning and transformative learning theories should positively impact cohort members. The transformative process can be difficult for the learner, and there is a need promote "cultural re-orientation from normative to analytic, personal to intellectual, particular to universal, and experiential to theoretical" (Rhodes, 2013, p. 4). Fundamental assumptions about an individual's perspectives and identity are challenged through education and the cohort model can provide a social atmosphere that can mitigate some of the negative emotions associated with such a transformation of self (Hodge, 2014; Provident et al., 2015).

Situated Learning Theory

Some of the core premises of Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) and Adult Learning Theory (Knowles, 1984) converge in Lave and Wenger's (1991) Situated Learning Theory, a constructivist theory claiming that students are more inclined to learn by actively

participating in the learning experience. Engaging in authentic tasks "immerses learners in the domain while they acquire the explicit knowledge of the domain as well as tacit knowledge about its values and behaviors" (Dondlinger & Jones, 2008, p. 21). Like the other two theories, situated learning contrasts with traditional educational settings and activities in which learning is abstract, postponed, and delivered through listening to lectures and reading books that are outside of the context experience (Knowles, 1984; Zheng, 2010).

Legitimate peripheral participation. As a situated activity where students are problem-solving in realistic situations, a process called legitimate peripheral participation is occurring (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this process, learners move away from the periphery of a learning community toward the center or the core of the community; learners shift from being newcomers to the experience or knowledge to being veterans. Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory connected closely to Bandura's (1977) theory which states that learning is relational. The social context of situational learning required the participants to become entrenched members of the community. Knowles' (1984) claims about Adult Learning Theory connected via the social aspect, but they also resonated via an adult learner's specific desire to harness previous experience and apply new learning in real and relevant ways. In Lave and Wenger's (1991) process, learners new to the community of practice start on the boundary, but subsequently move toward the middle through social relationships, engagement with professional context, and shared activity (Blackley & Sheffield, 2015; Halloway & Alexandre, 2012; Ward, 2014).

Not only is learning embedded in activity and real context, Lave and Wenger (1991) claimed that robust learning is unintentional, not deliberate. Supporters of the theory claimed that the learning comes from the act of participating as a member, not necessarily the product of the activity (Clancey, 1995). Zheng (2010) elaborated on that concept with the idea that adult

learners learn *within* experience, not merely *from* the experience. Flowing from a constructivist perspective, situated learning relies on social relationships, context-centered activity, collaboration, and invested membership in a community. As previously examined, these elements are present in a doctoral cohort.

Situated learning and the doctoral cohort. Proponents of Situated Learning Theory do not agree with the separation between *knowing* and *doing* (Chen, 2012). Instead, they lean towards a participant-centered, situational treatment of the learning process (Hodge et al., 2011). Additionally, they promote an apprenticeship-style context in which learners gain robust knowledge and experience as new skills become tools. At the higher education level, the participants are not apprentices or interns; however, they are intrinsically motivated and education-oriented (McGrath, 2009). Participants in a doctoral program are usually professionals in their field who are returning to academia to further their education and positively impact their careers. While higher education tends to be deeply rooted in the theoretical, adult learners expect to quickly gain strong expertise in applying research-based theory. As they are both students and professionals, they expect to contribute professionally and systematically (Clancey, 1995; Knowles, 1984; McGrath, 2009). Doctoral coursework that encourages real-world application in the form of case studies and lively discussion about policy and theory can harness the power of situated learning. This is not to say that lecture and rigorous scholarly research do not maintain an important function, but institutions and instructors that seek to embed situated activity support the overlap of knowing and doing for their students (Campbell, 2015; Monteiro et al., 2013; Power & Vaughan, 2010).

Applying a more inclusive interpretation of practice-based learning exchange writing, Hodge et al. (2011) stated, "Our attention on the importance of multidirectionality in learning

suggests that all partners in the exchange – the hosts, students and academics – have flexible and important roles as teacher, facilitators and learners" (p. 168). The term multidirectionality does not exclude traditional academia from the learning transfer, although it is important to note that Lave and Wenger (1991) qualified their claims by stating that learning can take place using traditional methods and settings. Hodge et al. (2011) interviewed participants from a variety of degree programs that advertised practice-based, or situated learning activity, and found that all participants, whether students or faculty, recognized that they had multiple memberships in different learning and communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Specifically, the adult learners engaged socially, professionally, academically, and practically; they also engaged with multiple roles or identities as seen when students became teachers and teachers became students.

In presenting Situated Learning Theory and the process of legitimate peripheral participation, Lave and Wenger (1991) hoped to inform new educational design, highlighting the benefits of nurturing the social context and the practical application of knowledge. An interesting and emerging practice in scholarly research is the doctoral writing group. While doctoral research writing is usually an isolated experience for the doctoral student, some researchers endorse writing groups because recent literature connects the concept of group writing with knowledge production (Lassig, Dillon, & Diezmann, 2013). Often led by a writing supervisor or professor, supporters claim that writing groups "reshape the power of learning as a social experience" (p. 2). Using the situated process, scholarly writing and the acquisition of knowledge would not be the main outcome of doctoral study; instead, the focus would be on the social interactions within a doctoral community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Further, adopters of the group dissertation approach would promote the idea that the unintentional

learning percolating from the group's writing process and social interactions would be more robust, more learner-centered, and more context-based than the actual product (Pella, 2011).

Applying Situated Learning Theory to the blended doctoral cohort, it is important that teachers and students reject the idea that a situation must occur in a physical setting and be physically interactive (Clancey, 1995). It is true that a blended cohort may experience face-to-face learning experiences that share a common physical location; however, how a learner's role is situated as a member of a community may occur in synchronous or even asynchronous settings. For example, a student in a blended cohort may leverage the social and supportive relationships with other cohort members while engaging in discussion board writing that deals with real-life professional context (Blackley & Sheffield, 2015; Halloway & Alexandre, 2012; Ward, 2014). Also important to reject is the notion that traditional teaching methods, including direct lecture and independent study, are antiquated or even poor alternatives when small group and collaborative strategies may not be efficient, traditional methods (Langer, 2009). At the doctoral level, a classroom reality is that some learning is clearly situative, and some is theoretical.

Situated learning and transformational theory. Some researchers study the application of Transformational Theory (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009) through the lens of Situated Learning Theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Specifically, a student's identity, as it is transformed in a doctoral program from practitioner to researcher, may be viewed as a transfer of identity via situated learning within a community of practice. By their nature, professional doctorates are outcome-driven as students not only research their own professional practice but also contribute to the literature through scholarly research and scholarly writing (Beutel et al., 2010). Unfortunately, little is known about the "effectiveness of different methods of preparing students

to develop and sustain their identity as scholarly writers" (Lassig et al., 2013, p. 1). The transition from practicing professional to scholarly writer requires a great deal of work and major shifts in thinking and practice (Beutel et al., 2010). Leveraging the relational aspects of the community of practice framework, doctoral students and teachers share similar passions, experiences, and problems in their profession. They are also engaged in constructing meaning, gaining knowledge, and participating as active members in multiple learning communities. While the learning may not be labeled *unintentional* (Lave & Wenger, 1991), that does not mean that the situated learning design, including the legitimate peripheral participation process, has not been influential.

Using a situated perspective, Pella (2011) researched teachers working in professional learning communities to produce high-quality curriculum and lesson design. The first theme to emerge from the findings was theoretical equilibrium. The teachers in the study discussed and synthesized diverse teaching materials and theories, even those that competed against each other. This eclectic and ultimately balanced approach to theoretical pedagogy reflected situated learning in two ways. First, the teachers themselves were actively and passionately engaging in the context of writing new curriculum. Although they came from different schools and districts, legitimate peripheral participation occurred as the teachers were absorbed into the community (Hodge et al., 2011). The participants' diverse experiences and resources were openly shared, affording active debate and negotiation (Pella, 2011). The theme of theoretical equilibrium also reflected Lave and Wenger's (1991) research because the pedagogical strategies that were ultimately endorsed represented a wide variety of assessments and activities, balancing direct instruction and independent writing experiences (Pella, 2011). As a result of the teachers'

experiences in situated learning, the students would also experience a community of practice as they engaged in multi-modal activities in order to become stronger academic writers.

The second theme to emerge from Pella's (2011) research was transformation and it was viewed as "an outcome of the participants' synthesis of knowledge and their theoretical equilibrium between competing values" (p. 113). The participants in Pella's study came with diverse professional experience and diverse expectations, and, as leaders in their departments at their individual sites, they had strong ties to their current lesson designs. However, they left the activities with a transformed sense of pedagogical expertise and self-efficacy "underpinned by learning theories such as social constructivism which considers each learner an individual with unique needs . . . complex and multidimensional" (Beckem & Watkins, 2012, p. 62). Although the participants of the study were highly-respected teachers, they became the students within this learning community, and the community itself transformed through their membership (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The theme of transformation is evidenced by the actions of the participants during and after the activities, and communities of practice were realized in the world of relevant engagement in authentic tasks (Hodge et al., 2011; Lave & Wegner, 1991; Zheng, 2010).

Lave and Wenger (1991) rejected the idea that learning was confined to the practice of education, specifically a traditional classroom, and they wrote, "Learning is an integral part of generative social practice in a lived-in world" (p. 35). Their theory sought to provide a holistic approach to learning that could be referenced in new pedagogical design. At the core was the idea that all learning, whether individual or collective, entailed some sort of social context (Zheng, 2010). They also promoted authentic, real-life contextual activity for students recognizing that real knowledge should be applied to everyday problems and challenges, eclipsing traditional tests and exams. While there are areas where doctoral studies need to veer

toward the theoretical, leveraging the social context of the cohort model and attempting to attach the theoretical to the practical whenever possible can help to promote a vibrant community of practice.

Graduate Cohort Models, Past and Present

What is the goal of graduate work, particularly for educators returning to higher education? One goal should be to nurture educational leadership among the new learners for the benefit of the professional and the profession (Harris, Lowery-Moore, & Farrow, 2008). According to Maher (2005), the cohort model for graduate degree programs began as an experimental method in the mid-1980s. Responding to a national interest in higher education for adults returning to school, which resulted from federal pressure to reform the educational system following the *Nation at Risk* report, universities began to explore the administrative benefits in delivery through a lock-step curriculum. The field of education is dynamic and demands consistent professional development and education. It was difficult for many educators to leave their careers to go back to a university for a new degree or certification program. Students were seeking programs that blended evening and weekend classes, and eventually online studies, and offered academic, personal, and financial support (Nimer, 2009). The educational cohort model provided a solution to achieve these goals.

Adult learners responded positively to the one-class-at–a-time approach that allowed for increased intensity over a shorter period of time. Adult learners who were juggling professional and personal responsibilities appreciated the planned course of study and welcomed less anxiety and stress related to registration issues (Nimer, 2009). Instead of taking a couple courses over a fifteen-week semester, learners could focus on one class every eight weeks. Therefore, in addition to the academic, social, and collegial advantages, the cohort design also provided new

opportunities for accelerated classes and communities of learning that were based in pedagogical theory (McCarthy, Trenga, & Weiner, 2005). "It is the cohort members' professional experience that turns theory into reality. Sharing real time experiences creates a broader understanding and appreciation of the full educational leadership spectrum" (Nimer, 2009, p. 6).

Finally, cohort membership increased with the flexibility of off-campus learning sites that catered to the professional adult. A university could attract student populations that were previously out of a geographically desirable area by setting up satellite campuses, conveniently delivering the course and the professor to the students that worked specifically with the students' professional schedules (Rausch & Crawford, 2012; Ward, 2014).

According to Rausch and Crawford (2012), cohort-based learning has been on the rise in post-secondary institutions since the early 1990s; however, Maher (2005) cites that this educational format has been used since the middle of the 20th century. The advent of for-profit universities, like University of Phoenix and National University, drove the movement suggesting that adult learners were willing to pay a premium for the new kind of learning platform. Blending the Social Learning Theory with Transformative Learning Theory, the cohort model provided a favorable environment and structure, a community of learners, which resulted in increased student learning and professional transformation. "Higher education has consistently viewed community as essential to support collaborative learning and discourse associated with higher levels of learning" (Rausch & Crawford, 2012, p. 4). The learning community of a cohort embodied a learning partnership among members, learners and instructors. The result of this learning partnership was a social support system that deeply engaged learners within collaborative projects and independent research.

Witte and James (1998) endorsed a cohort partnership specifically for the doctoral dissertation over a host of traditional, individual dissertation efforts. They reported that the cohort model became an innovative approach to the doctoral dissertation in the late 1990s even before the fruition of distance learning through electronic means. Adding support for the social and transformative characteristics of the cohort model, researchers found that solidified relationships and roles gave rise to a mutually supportive environment in which members shared resources and energy as academic partners (Bandura, 1977; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Witte & James, 1998). Again, the social learning aspects of cohort membership evolved into a true community of learners, and aided in the transformative nature of higher education (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Rausch & Crawford, 2012).

A point of criticism, however, regarding doctoral work in education leadership arose around cohort program quality (Morrison, Rudd, Zumeta, & Nerad, 2011; Power & Vaughan, 2010; Stewart, et al, 2011; Yener, 2013). This skepticism may have risen due to a lack of literature and empirical research about the cohort model's impact at the highest levels of education. Would the cohort model live up to the standards of traditional doctoral programs and elite research facilities? Although there is a paucity of literature in the area of program excellence in higher education, students who have earned terminal degrees like EdDs and PhDs tend to be split regarding what matters most for excellence in a program. Morrison et al. (2011) reported that a little over half of their research respondents perceived the excellence in abstract academic quality, found at elite research institutions, to be the dominant factor in a high-quality program. Conversely, a little less than half of respondents believed that other factors such as mentoring, professional collaboration, and socialization, characteristics of the cohort model, were as important as the academic rigors and perceived institutional status.

One reason why nearly half of doctoral candidates espouse the high quality of the cohort model is because they view the doctoral process to be very transformative and that a nurturing learning environment is key to the success of that process. In addition, universities are turning to cohort models because of the documented impact on increased retention, graduation and success rates (Unzueta, Moores-Abdool & Donet, 2008).

Calling for more practice and study in the area of establishing a safe and respectful learning environment that teaches students how to be both reflective and reflexive on the transformational journey from practitioner to researcher, researchers have praised the graduate cohort model writing, "Meaningful connections between theory and practice were forged as students continuously engaged in experiential activities and accessed divergent forms of content with peers and instructors" (Wright, Lange & Da Costa, 2009, p. 10). Both Unzueta et al. (2008), and Wright et al. (2009) joined other researchers of higher education in the challenging call for more study in the area of cohort design, cohort pedagogy, and cohort efficacy and quality.

E-Learning and the Blended Cohort

In the 1980s and 1990s, the cohort educational model mainly consisted of members from a particular area who came together at a site, usual a school building geographically close to the majority of the participants. Courses were delivered in a live, face-to-face format, where students convened for a few hours one evening a week, still following a traditional university calendar (Rausch & Crawford, 2012). Universities conveniently sent professors to the students.

At the dawn of the 21st century, digital technologies, including the ability to deliver curriculum over the Internet and the ability to collaborate synchronously, gave rise to distance learning. Whereas the cohort model allowed universities to branch out to new geographical

areas, distance learning seemed to remove all geographical boundaries to higher education. According to Yener (2013), distance learning through information technologies had a significant impact on university studies as institutions began to adopt sophisticated marketing techniques to persuade students to enroll in programs that were previously unavailable to them, including international students.

As student consumers demanded more convenient access of online learning, universities tried to step away from the face-to-face cohort and embraced a fully online program delivery method (Rausch & Crawford, 2012). This online learning method employed an asynchronous style that allowed the learners to control the when and where of their engagement in the learning process. Unfortunately, current pedagogical research informed course designers to reject stand-alone, asynchronous learning environments which did not meet learner's needs, or the needs of faculty and administrators (Power & Vaughan, 2010). Other models of online learning had to be developed. Specifically, the growth of online learning allowed for great convenience and growth of student populations, but the disconnected method undermined the interdependent aspects of social learning. Rausch and Crawford (2012) asserted that knowledge was built up through the curriculum and the assignments, and then synthesized through the social dynamics of the learning environment. "Knowledge could not simply be generated by instructors and linearly transmitted to students to use whether in face-to-face or virtual classroom environment" (p. 176). Basically, online learning was in its infancy. What needed to be developed was a hybrid of delivery and learning experiences, blending asynchronous study and reflection, with synchronous student engagement, produced either in traditional face-to-face opportunities or through online technology with webcams and Internet connection.

As universities turn to cohort models for graduate education, there has been a push for both quantitative and qualitative data to be collected that would support the model's effectiveness for the student and the institution, as well as highlight areas for growth and further research. Ford and Vaughan (2011) examined an EdD cohort at the University of Oklahoma through a phenomenological lens. Instead of reporting the lists of themes revealed in the data, the authors created a dramaturgical script, a very creative and fluid mechanism for presenting three main themes: (1) faculty and student relationships; (2) works and/or personal problems; and (3) dealing with technology. They explained how the dramaturgical presentation was a "natural extension of a symbolic interactionist analysis" (Ford & Vaughan, 2011, p. 1651). Instead of providing a list of themes with examples from a few interviews, this method provided a narrative document that proved to be more revealing of the experience.

Examining the literature through the theoretical lenses of professional learning communities (PLCs), Transformational Theory, and Transactional Distance and Social Presence Theory, Ford and Vaughan (2011) found that these theories work together in support of the cohort delivery model, especially for distance learning. The four-year research project began when the university first created an EdD program that integrated both local students who met on campus and virtual students who met through digital technology like Skype. While it focused on the cohort members' lived experiences in the beginning, by the end of the research, the project evolved to focus on the participants' interactions with each other. "Ultimately people create an emotional or academic connection through mutual understanding, not necessarily consensus on any one idea" (Ford & Vaughan, 2011, p. 1646).

While the researchers found that the blended cohort was supported theoretically, they also uncovered negative student perceptions regarding the lack of cohort understanding from the

faculty. They concluded their study with a call for faculty members to "wake up" and realize that they have the power, even inadvertently, to "discourage (students) by neglecting students' needs to observe positive reconstructions of themselves through the authority figures' eyes" (Ford & Vaughan, 2011, p. 1662). This study provided an example of a doctoral cohort that used a blended format in which the researchers called on the institutional faculty to improve their own method to positively impact student achievement and transformation.

According to a study from the University of North Texas, there are reasons why faculty may fail to effectively engage doctoral students in a blended cohort. One reason may be that faculty are reluctant to branch out to distance learners fearing that outcomes would be different from a traditional residential program, particularly in the arena of student/faculty relationships and mentorships. "The major concern of all faculty members was that the outcomes of both the residential and online offerings of the PhD were equally demanding, regardless of the means by which the content was delivered" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 21). Another reason may be that professors have not received enough professional development required for faculty proficiency in the blended framework. "As corporations and educational institutions increasingly move teaching and learning to online spaces, the demand for experts in the areas of training and online instruction continues to grow" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 20). According to these researchers, the faculty and administration needed to meet regularly, face-to-face, to protect the design and intent of the program. In addition, a new faculty position was created, an associate faculty mentor, whose responsibility was to establish relationships with the cohort members and see them through the hooding ceremony at graduation.

Some universities have been actively engaging in the innovation and implementation of e-learning and blended cohort delivery. Ward, West, Peat, and Atkinson (2010) propose that

institutions must commit to following project management theory through which time is taken to propose, plan, create, implement, and evaluate high-quality e-learning resources. One challenge to this process is that university faculty must work together to innovate a new framework for higher education that previously only existed in the realm of elite research facilities. In addition, some traditional pedagogical techniques, such as the lecture method, do not lend themselves to e-learning and the online environment. New instructional strategies need to be developed by and taught to the university faculty as they spend less time presenting their intellectual capital and more time building the collective capacity of the class or cohort (Abdelaziz, 2012). In other words, a systems change approach would most benefit the universities, the faculty, and the students.

Power and Vaughan (2010) contend that the Blended Online Learning Design (BOLD) may be the next revolutionary step in higher education, but faculty need to adapt old practices, institutions need to invest the necessary support to the faculty, and researchers of higher education need to continue to collect data that not only applauds the successes of blended learning but also critically analyzes the pitfalls and areas for growth. Some researchers suggest the development of instructional design models and strategies that offer "a framework for planning, developing, and evaluating instruction based on learner's needs, content requirements and delivery methods" (Abdelaziz, 2012, p. 222). There is agreement, however, that learning theory supports the fostering and maintenance of a classroom culture in which the best benefits of the cohort model exist, whether through face-to-face interaction or engagement through videoconferencing (Stewart et al., 2011).

The National Research Council (NRC) reported in 1999 that technology has become a very important tool for expanding access to education and promoting learning; however, the

NRC recognized that technology is a tool for education, not an environment (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). High quality learning happens in a social atmosphere where dialogue occurs through collaborative discovery including students and teachers. According to Stewart et al. (2011), a conceptual, theoretical, and practical concern about blended learning environments is whether or not it can allow for enough intellectual exchange of knowledge amongst the teachers and the students. To facilitate this environment of exchange, the NRC suggested that effective learning environments should employ technology to achieve the following five goals: (1) bring real-world problems into the classroom; (2) provide scaffolding support to increase what learners can do through model-based learning; (3) increase opportunities for relevant and helpful feedback by teachers and peers; (4) build local and global communities of learning; and (5) expand opportunities for teachers' learning (Bransford et al., 2000).

Aligning with the NRC's recommendations, a focus on student-centered learning and increased student engagement should inform instructional design for blended environments. "If students are hungry for knowledge based on a positive simulated experience … it is much easier for an educator to engage them in more meaningful interactions during other course activities" (Beckem & Watkins, 2012, p. 62). Through stimulating engagement in assessments such as rubric-driven online portfolios and collaborative, project-based learning for real-world applications, blended cohorts that employ a hybrid of synchronous and asynchronous environments may benefit the students' transformative learning and the program's efficacy for future students (Dondlinger & Jones, 2008). Rausch and Crawford (2012) reported how the trust and safety established in the face-to-face sessions were uniquely supported by the anonymity and flexibility of the online classroom. Adult learners appreciated both levels of contact.

At the University of Florida, surveying graduate students during a blended doctoral program revealed interesting data. Kumar, Dawson, Black, Cavanaugh, and Sessums (2011) gave a survey to students after the first year of a blended EdD program. The newly-created program built upon Garrison and Vaughan's (2008) Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework which required three components for success: (1) teaching presence; (2) social presence; and (3) cognitive presence. The program utilized the cohort model to foster the CoI as the cohort members shared common goals, supported and interacted with each other, and felt the intense support of faculty members. The program was blended in that it implemented five main features including online coursework, face-to-face campus experiences, inquiry or discussion groups, synchronous online sessions, and asynchronous online sessions.

A significant point in the article was that the researchers could not find instruments that were designed to measure the three components of the CoI in a blended program; therefore, they had to create an original survey to study student perceptions after the first year. The survey had three parts: (1) Faculty Instruction and Feedback; (2) Support, Learning Environments, and Community-building; and (3) Application of Student Learning. While the article concludes with a relevant discussion on the significance of online programs, the researchers came back over and over again to the point that faculty leadership is imperative to all three CoI factors. Needing not only excellent online pedagogical and organizational skills, the experience of teaching an online course requires faculty to understand administrative procedures while collaborating with designers and technology specialists to ensure different types of support (Kumar & Dawson, 2012; Kumar et al., 2011).

Indeed, the hybrid learning community has opened new territories into instructional design, program development, assessment, and faculty development. "It brings together separate

but complementary conceptual frameworks, blended learning, online learning, and faculty communities of inquiry" (Power & Vaughan, 2010, p. 33). However, significant and ongoing research in the areas of blended learning, particularly for high-quality higher education, is needed to dispel the negative and skeptical views that online learning disconnects faculty and learners from the academic institution. As Monteiro et al. (2013) asserted, the introduction of technology does not necessarily imply development and upgrading of pedagogical skills.

Instead, the original cohort model that leaned heavily on social learning and transformative theory should be the cornerstone of the virtual classroom. More research measurements are needed to bring empirical data to the discussion because description of how this model applies to online teaching and learning could be beneficial to other institutions (Kumar & Dawson, 2012; Kumar et al., 2011). Beutel et al. (2010) asserted that well-designed, blended learning approaches have been linked to improved coursework submissions and reduced rates of student attrition. The key words that continue to rise from scholarly research tend to revolve around new design that intentionally leverages the supportive and flexible structure of the cohort model to minimize student isolation and assist students in academic progression via collaborative study (Gardner, 2008; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Maher, 2005, Wisker, Robinson, & Shacham, 2007).

Adult Learning in the Blended Doctoral Cohort

Blended learning principles align with the five assumptions and key principles of andragogy. As previously examined, blended learning mixes both synchronous and asynchronous methods of instruction, providing the flexibility of online engagement while maintaining the important instructional presence (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). "Blended learning carries special promise for adult learners and deserves attention from institutions that

serve those students" (Korr et al., 2012, p. 1). In a blended doctoral cohort, the adult learners differ from younger, more traditional students because they bring learning styles, life experiences, and self-directed motivation that the group can collectively embrace (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). Institutions and professors can harness the cohort members' real-life expertise, inherent desire to share relevant experiences, and high level of autonomy and maturity. The synergies between blended and adult learning, including the expected regular engagement via online discussion boards and group projects and presentations, support its benefit for a doctoral cohort (Korr et al., 2012).

On the other hand, institutions and professors could prohibit the success of the cohort members by not acknowledging the adult learners' needs for relevance and autonomy. One primary pitfall that must be avoided is the advent of busywork, or perceived busywork (Knowles, 1984). Adult learners can feel frustration if they do not see the relevance of a new strategy or new theory as it connects or benefits their current professional and academic careers (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). This may be a tricky situation for doctoral students who must transform from practitioners to researchers. That process is replete with the study of theory and the curation of research. To avoid this frustration, professors can continue to motivate the students with an interactive and engaging classroom, whether online or face-to-face, and provide their self-directed students with authentic and timely feedback that is both personal and applicable. According to Sogunro (2015), the *Feedback Cycle* "begins and ends with feedback. That is, feedback arouses motivation which consequently triggers improvement of performance. Performance evokes another set of feedback" (p. 30). Meaningful feedback within engaging activities where students are allowed to contribute through presentations and discussion can

connect the material that is being taught and discussed with what is happening in the students' own lives (McGrath, 2009).

By aligning Adult Learning Theory with Social Learning Theory, and by creating a community of inquiry with social, cognitive, and teaching presence, the blended doctoral cohort is increasingly the preferred organizational structure in educational leadership programs (Greenlee & Karanxha, 2010). The cohort members learn together in the course-by-course structure, and over time their social bonds strengthen with shared experiences, and supportive relationships (Wisker et al., 2007). A truly effective adult cohort needs to have plenty of social elements that capitalizes on both the formal and informal learning (Denny, 2017). Formal learning is understandably embedded in the institution's accredited curriculum and delivered in the blended cohort model via synchronous and asynchronous modules, discussions, and assessments; however, informal learning also occurs when the students share their experiences and support each other through the program and the learning process.

Additionally, Adult Learning Theory is revealed in the community of inquiry framework (Garrison & Akyol, 2013). Cognitively, cohort members reflect andragogy by being self-directed, bringing readiness to learn, and maintaining an orientation to learning (Knowles, 1984). The mature and motivated adult learner desires to apply new knowledge and experience to his/her professional and academic career. Mirroring a cognitive presence, "The role of the learner is that of active, initiative-taking inquirer" (Knowles, 1979, p. 37). A teaching presence occurs when professors engage with students by not only delivering required information and teaching required skills, but also by tapping students' prior experiences and keeping tasks relevant to real-life application. The institution can further support the cohort structure by encouraging students to meet with each other outside of the structured learning activities in order

to share plans, developments, and achievements (Wisker et al., 2007). Drawing on social presence, andragogy and Social Learning Theory work synergistically to enhance group cohesiveness and increase group satisfaction in the learning (Greenlee & Karanxha, 2010). That satisfaction aids in the transformation of the cohort members, helping to fight isolation and frustration in the rigorous academic program. Sogunro (2015) added to the idea by highlighting the need for interactivity for effective adult learning. Adult learners are generally uninterested in long lectures, particularly if they are theoretical in nature; instead, student motivation and engagement is increased when adult learners feel safe to share in the discussion and the class becomes a community of learners.

Instructors of adult learning, at the doctoral level or in other situations, should be trained in Knowles' (1984) Adult Learning Theory for three main reasons. First, being well-versed in Adult Learning Theory and other supporting theories help to create a learner-centered environment instead of a teacher-centered environment. When instructors and institutions research and focus on the theories that support the learner, the result is an engaging curriculum supported by research-based teaching methods to support deep learning. "Deep learning requires higher-order thinking, collaboration and conversation with peers, and reflection and feedback" (Blackley & Sheffield, 2015, p. 398). While postgraduate learning is often perceived as an isolated experience in research, nurturing the social tendencies of the cohort while encouraging adult learners to share and build upon their real-world reservoir of experience can be quite beneficial (Wisker et al., 2007). A sense of belonging and a freedom to discuss both academic and personal issues may not only support student motivation but also enhance the perception of relevance.

Adult learners need to know why and how they are learning new information, even they have voluntarily enrolled in the program and paid the tuition (McGrath, 2009), and this leads to the second reason why andragogy should be embedded in a blended doctoral program. Pedagogical methods were long assumed to apply equally to children, young adults, and more mature adult learners; however, research revealed that adult learners resist and resent when they are treated like younger, more traditional students (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Knowles, 1984). Adults, particularly professionals going back to school to earn a doctoral degree, are highly motivated to be responsible for their own learning and they wish to be empowered to take a more active role in the learning process (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). Institutions and instructors should harness this self-directed Type I motivation as the program seeks to deepen learning and increase student scholarly achievement (Pink, 2009). It is important that educators use a variety of methods and techniques that will enhance and empower the learning experience (Giannoukos et al., 2015).

Finally, the technological advances of the 21st century have opened new opportunities for adult learners via the digital flexibly of blended learning. While institutions and teachers have the opportunity to enhance the education of large numbers of students in ways that the old traditional campus-centered programs could never do, 21st century adult students want "personalized flexible learning, and instantaneous feedback and communication" (Blackley & Sheffield, 2015, p. 407). Adults tend to be problem-centered in their orientation (Knowles, 1984), and they are not very interested in prolonged or postponed application or feedback. McGrath (2009) suggested that lecturers consider using case studies and students' real professional situations in class so that the adult learners apply the theory in pragmatic ways.

The Challenge of Blended Learning Readiness

Much research is needed in the area of blended online learning design in order to improve graduate courses that are delivered in this format (Power, 2008). It is not enough for the candidates and their instructors to have been previously matriculated through a traditional educational process. The issue of readiness for a blended graduate cohort reveals areas of growth and reform for both the students and the teachers. Because blended learning cohort models integrate new technologies and instructional design, everyone in the learning community must obtain the social learning readiness, scholarly readiness, and digital readiness, scholarly readiness required for success.

As previously examined, the cohort model demands meaningful and ongoing engagement in its collaborative environment. Both students and teachers create and benefit from cohort socialization, and they must be ready to assume the social roles that are expected. Teachers that previously employed traditional lecture-based strategies need to undergo professional development to design and facilitate dynamic web-based education (Abdelaziz, 2012). For example, instructors need to be trained in the engaging use of a discussion forum and the best practices of collaborative learning (Rausch & Crawford, 2012). In addition to learning engaging instructional strategies, university faculty should have truthful and open conversations that are focused on student learning (Jones, 2010).

Students, in turn, need to model the appropriate learner values and expectations as they take advantage of the benefit described in Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory. According to Stallone (2011), doctoral students perceive human factors such as support within the cohort and deep relationships with fellow students and faculty to be of utmost importance in program completion. Also, students need to be ready to contend with the many distractions that challenge the professional doctoral candidate. A range of boundary management techniques can help e-

learners cope with distractions to their doctoral studies and research (Winter, Cotton, Gavin, and Yorke, 2010).

In addition to cohort readiness, doctoral cohort members must be ready for the significant demands for scholarly research including library literacy and research writing (Stallone, 2011; Winter et al., 2010). There is a need for appropriate and effective assessment of doctoral candidates at the start of, or perhaps prior to acceptance to a doctoral program to ensure that the candidates have the appropriate level of thinking, reasoning, and writing skills to be able to matriculate successfully (Maher & Barnes, 2010). Although universities may require a writing sample and even a graduate entrance exam, "A baseline assessment of newly admitted students' readiness to engage in scholarly thinking, reasoning, and writing was absent; the story was missing its introduction" (Maher & Barnes, 2010, p. 9).

Scholarly writing readiness is of particular concern to university librarians who contend that ongoing library instruction may be needed for doctoral candidates in particular as point of need moments arise toward the end of the doctoral program. Necessary library skills impact students' scholarly readiness because of the importance of the literature review for the dissertation (Tuñón & Ramirez, 2010). The distance component of the blended cohort may pose particular challenges as students may be unable to personally benefit from the university librarians and the physical library resources. Deliberate library literacy training and a multilayered approach to research readiness may be appropriate (Ralph, 2012).

Finally, one of the most visible areas of readiness and need falls under the area of digital literacy and technological proficiency, for both students and teachers. Winter et al. (2010) revealed how institutions struggle to embed e-learning effectively. Although digital integration continues to grow in usage, much remains to be learned about how technology can best be used

to enhance student learning. A new position in higher education may be emerging, the learning technologists or the education-technology specialist. "The role of learning technologists, a professional group that has emerged during the last fifteen to twenty years, may be diversifying to including supporting e-research" (Peacock et al., 2009, p. 115). These digital experts may help usher in the new and expanding era of virtual, digital, and online e-research tools and techniques, improving students' and teachers' digital readiness for a blended cohort environment.

Recent University Conversions to Blended Learning

Blended learning, especially for higher education, has become more and more attractive to both students and institutions. The idea was appealing; more professional adults could engage in the academic sphere because of the convenience and flexibility of Internet-based education. Institutional and governmental expectations of completion and value have led to greater attention at the levels of policy, practice, and research on postgraduate student learning (Wisker et al., 2007). Along with the rapid development of such programs came questions and concerns about quality, and the academic and social engagement that is necessary for rigorous learning. Chaves (2009) pointed out that fostering a student learning community could easily be ignored in the rush to complete course design models, and methods for nurturing high-quality levels of social and scholarly interaction could and needed to be achieved. "Creating a virtual learning community and its diverse benefits is what must be at the heart of e-learning curricula" (p. 1). In the last decade, more research has been published to document institutions' transitions from more traditional learning approaches to the employment of the blended cohort model. Two studies, one from California and one from Texas, reflect the intentional movement toward high-quality blended learning models that increase access to higher education; however, whereas the

Californian institution sought to move all of its adult degree programs to a blended format, and to do it within one year (Korr et al., 2012), the Texan institute only discusses one degree program and its goal to transition over three years (Jones et al., 2014).

Brandman University and University of North Texas

Korr et al. (2012) published an article that described Brandman University's planning, training, and implementation processes for transitioning from separate face-to-face or fully online programs, to an institution-wide blended learning structure. Brandman University is located in Southern California and it serves adult learners throughout the west coast. In 2009, administration and faculty converged to discuss strategic planning; they agreed to move the entire university to a blended learning model, thereby giving students more flexibility, improving and integrating cutting edge online technology, and creating an online database where key assessment artifacts could be more efficiently curated and accessed for quality control (Korr et al., 2012).

Jones et al. (2014) published an article that also reported on the development of a new online version of the Doctorate in Learning in Technologies at the University of North Texas (UNT), which is north of Dallas and just south of the Oklahoma/Texas border. The university already had an accredited doctorate for residential students who met on the campus, and that program was already utilizing blended learning strategies. In 2008, UNT assembled a team, led primarily by faculty, to systematically change and expand the blended doctorate to include students who could not attend weekly face-to-face classes on the campus like the residential students. UNT was highly concerned with keeping the outcomes true to the residential program (Jones et al., 2014).

Connection to learning theory. The researchers cited a particular interest in the connection between andragogy (Knowles, 1984) and the blended learning framework. Noting that there was a lack of single understanding of the difference between blended learning, e-learning, and hybrid learning, the researchers at Brandman University defined blended learning as "an extension of the whole of the learning experience that combines traditional classroom time meaningfully with online learning activities" (Korr et al., 2012, p. 3). At UNT, the PhD in Learning Technologies program was described as a vibrant real-world program that prepared graduates to meet the necessities of digital age instruction for both corporate and educational partners (Jones et al., 2014). Tapping into highly motivated adult learners who bring with them wide ranges of professional experience, both universities sought to develop online learning activities designed to reduce any perceived *busy work* while engaging the students with authentic tasks such as case studies, tutorials, self-testing exercises, simulations, and online group collaborations. Designers curated research that blended learning broke down the traditional classroom-based framework by demanding more meaningful and more regular engagement with the content and with the cohort members (Beckem & Watkins, 2012; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Korr et al., 2012; Lave & Wegner, 1991).

The blended learning structure addressed Knowles' (1984) point about relevancy in two ways. First, students were informed from the beginning how the courses supported their professional and personal desires for continued education. Second, the blended format was perceived to value student investment of time in contrast with their other real-world personal and professional time constraints. Jones et al. (2014) advertised a distributed program for distance-learners with flexibility of location and increased direct academic mentoring. Blended learning decreased the hours that students had to spend in a physical classroom, and it freed students to

attend to other priorities when required (Korr et al., 2012). The delivery of the program added relevance by acknowledging the life circumstances of adults while still increasing their access to higher education (Giannoukous, et al., 2015; Sogunro, 2015).

The transition team. At the start of the planning process, Brandman University assembled a team that included an instructional designer, administration, and some faculty who were also instructional designers. The team was eventually named "iDEAL" which stood for Instructional Design for Engaged Adult Learning, and they struggled to overcome two major challenges (Korr et al., 2012). One challenge dealt with time as the team was given one year to transform over 100 courses from face-to-face to blended. The iDEAL team met this goal, but the researches pointed out that in some cases the courses were satisfactory but not excellent, and they required continuous polish. UNT sought to transition to the blended model over three years, but, unlike Brandman University, UNT had a more limited number of faculty members and they decided to handle the transition by adding personnel who would have advising and mentoring responsibilities (Jones et al., 2014). Whereas Brandman University employed a large number of adjunct faculty, UNT decided to add associate faculty who would be non-tenured, and would serve primarily as dissertation chairs, mentoring students through their academic writing.

Although Korr et al. (2012) did not discuss the embedded cohort structure in their article, they did acknowledge Knowles' (1984) Adult Learning Theory, and Garrison and Vaughan's (2008) community of inquiry framework, among other leaders in blended learning, as core educational theories that support adult learning in the blended format. They did partially include the use of the cohort model in description of the one-night-per-week accelerated model and the desire to foster social relationships within the blended model. Jones et al. (2014) specifically cited the benefits of the cohort structure in a doctoral program citing reduced student isolation

and increased networking and continuity. As students matriculated through the curriculum, they tended to experience less anxiety because of the support of the group (Gardner, 2008; Wisker et al., 2007).

Redeveloping the curriculum proved to be very demanding. At UNT, faculty members began by reimagining current courses for online delivery. They then produced and developed the courses for themselves to teach, and also developed a separate section for other faculty who might end up teaching the course (Jones et al., 2014). At Brandman University, full-time and some adjunct faculty were tapped to convert existing face-to-face classes to blended courses (Korr et al., 2012). Both articles carefully mentioned that the traditional courses were not simply copied and pasted into the master course shell; instead, each course was treated to a full makeover including a new syllabus with updated learning objectives, fully scripted assessments and discussion board prompts, and an integrated balance between the synchronous and asynchronous content and assignments. Korr et al. (2012) also purported that there is a connection between high-quality online resources and higher student performance.

The pilot year. Getting to the pilot year stage was rushed and challenging for both universities; however, at Brandman University it became much more problematic when it came time to train hundreds of faculty members in blended learning theory, accompanying pedagogical strategies, and the necessary technological skills to facilitate a blended course (Korr et al., 2012). At both universities, the faculty member who originally designed the blended course was the first to teach it. These test runs revealed a variety of technical issues. Further problems arose when adjunct faculty were given the blended courses and they had to quickly familiarize themselves with an updated course and a new delivery format (Korr et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2014). At UNT, the original designer regularly updated content, evaluated the

teaching strategies, and updated the technology tools when necessary (Jones et al., 2014). UNT used safeguard to ensure quality control between the residential and the distributed programs. Ironically, or perhaps ingeniously, training sessions for Brandman University were delivered to the adjunct faculty via a blended format. These sessions taught the basics of blended delivery, educated professors in the theory and rationale for the new approach, and emphasized the institution's desire to have the adjunct faculty partner with the university in the ongoing improvement process (Korr et al., 2012).

Perceived benefits. As the universities rolled out the blended courses, there were a range of benefits that reflected the learning theory that supported the transition. For example, at Brandman University, documented student-to-student and student-to-teacher interaction increased and students felt more socially connected to their class community as they were engaged in learning throughout the week instead of once per week (Korr et al., 2012). At UNT, cohort rapport was first established at the annual summer meeting when students in the blended offering met in person for five to seven days. "Increased rapport lent itself to more online interaction and more discourse because of the student's increased trust in the person(s) with whom they are communicating" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 23). At both universities, adult students' natural desire for timely and meaningful feedback (Knowles, 1984) was also satisfied more efficiently through the online interaction. UNT specifically utilized their associate faculty mentors to guide students through scholarly writing (Jones et al., 2014); whereas Brandman University entrusted adjunct faculty to provide adequate teaching presence (Garrison & Akyol, 2013).

Perceived challenges. Although leadership from both universities sought to mitigate anticipated problems, three main areas of concern and challenge arose: (1) workload

management, (2) course pacing, and (3) contrasts in delivery models. Both teachers and students had to adjust how they managed their workloads. Teachers shared that the blended format felt like two distinct concurrent classes, one face-to-face and the other online (Korr et al., 2012). Throughout each week, instructors had to prepare for the next face-to-face meeting while monitoring discussion boards, providing feedback, and recording grades. Some students underestimated the time and commitment that would be required to handle the intensity of a distributed/online PhD (Jones et al., 2014). Students also struggled with the new method because they had effectively embedded the old face-to-face program into their personal and professional lives (Korr et al., 2012). The blended learning demanded increased self-management from both students and teachers.

Course pacing proved to be a sensitive issue. Some teachers and students at Brandman University felt negatively impacted by the reduction of face-to-face time from 45 to 24 hours over the 8-week course where some classes, such as a master's course in marriage and family therapy, inherently and heavily relied on face-to-face hours for discussion and roll-play (Korr et al., 2012). The second issue in the pacing dynamic involved teacher and student perceptions of having to always engage or be *on* throughout the week. In theory, the continuous learning aligned with andragogy (Knowles, 1984) because, according to the theory, adult learners should be self-motivated and oriented to immediate learning for real-world benefit. In reality, there was some push back about the new pacing, especially from teachers who felt undercompensated considering their added time commitments (Korr et al., 2012). At UNT, many of the students did not feel adequately prepared for the new course designs. The technical issues and adjusted pacing impacted added to this feeling of unpreparedness (Jones et al., 2014).

Adding to the concerns about pacing, faculty and students at Brandman University complained about the contrasts in delivery models, particularly the difference between fully online and blended instruction. Some felt that the highly-structured demands of the course shells were too inflexible and the expertise of the actual instructor, not the course designer, could not shine through (Korr et al., 2012). At UNT, the core faculty took issue with how the associate faculty assumed their roles. In order to maintain quality cohesion between program models, they felt they needed to have more face-to-face contact with the associate faculty to more clearly establish role expectations (Jones et al., 2014). Some learners also criticized the use of discussion boards as a means to develop a sense of community among the students (Korr et al., 2012). They argued that discussion board posts and discussion should fulfill specific curricular goals rather than simply generating online discussion. They expressed some frustration with what they saw as excessive use of the discussion board when rich discussions were already happening in synchronous, face-to-face sessions.

Three recommendations for other universities. Researchers from both universities agreed on three recommendations they would offer to other universities considering similar transitions: (1) take the time it needs, (2) allow faculty enough time to meet, and (3) flush out the institutional policies. The authors recommend taking more time in the development process to create and test the new system to minimize stress and incorporate more stakeholders in the process. While Brandman University did contract with instructional designers, much of the tension in the process came from overworked and stressed tenured faculty, some of whom were not well equipped to create blended learning master courses. Korr et al. (2012) warned that the skills needed to be a course developer may not be present in all full-time faculty. Identifying the strengths required to develop a blended course, and taking inventory of the university faculty

should be early steps in the development process. Jones et al. (2014) recommended that additional staffing must occur early in the process because delays could be difficult to overcome, and while the institution is waiting on new hires, key faculty members may experience an increased workload. Researchers of both articles warned against the draining exhaustion that was a result of the transition process, and recommended compensating faculty and staff monetarily and professionally for their efforts (Korr et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2014). Both recognized that faculty investment was necessary for this type of institutional change, and that moving too fast may negatively impact faculty buy-in (Jones et al., 2014). Korr et al. (2012) shared that some adjunct faculty and students felt excluded from the planning process, and that taking more time to gather consensus from multiple groups could have mitigated frustration and resentment.

A second recommendation in both articles reflected the high value put on robust faculty debate and discussion. Researchers at Brandman University cautioned developers to reject the one-size-fits-all approach in blended learning, and urged institutions to understand that different programs and courses may require a different approach. The balance of synchronous and asynchronous instruction, combined with varying needs for discussion and group work, should be carefully considered for different degree programs and different course types (Korr et al., 2012). UNT researchers also shared when meetings are done in an unsystematic manner, "Faculty members rarely have sufficient time to meet and discuss the issues inherent in the design, development, and implementation of the program" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 24). Brandman had built into the new blended design for each course a system-wide online forum in which the course developer and the master teacher could interact with all instructors. This collaborative professional environment was a highly-anticipated benefit of the blended model. Unfortunately,

the ideal types of faculty interaction were irregularly applied because, while some instructors engaged enthusiastically, others were unmotivated by the lack of additional compensation or obligation and ignored the forum (Korr et al., 2012). However, this refusal to engage more intently could have been caused by the frustration and resentment mentioned previously. Ultimately, both see benefit in meeting regularly to reaffirm shared goals to ensure best practices. UNT chose to schedule more frequent meetings to address issues, however, Brandman would probably have to use blended learning techniques, such as their online forum, videoconferencing, and system-wide conferences, to coordinate the large amount of faculty from various geographical locations.

Third, both articles cited frustrations regarding institutional policies. For both programs, so much effort went into the logistics, the creation of blended courses, the training of faculty, and the actual roll out. Still, specific questions about procedures seemed to uncover gaps in policy. For example, at Brandman University, it was unclear the moment that a blended course began (Korr et al., 2012). Was it when a student could access the course shell? Or was it when students gathered for the first face-to-face meeting online? UNT realized the own responsibility when it came to miscommunications concerning expectations and details of the program. Specifically, program leaders assumed that the typical orientation, the one they delivered to residential students, would suffice for the distance learners in the fully blended program. Program directors later found that, because the residential learner orientation did not adequately connect to the distance learners, some items took months to explain and discuss for the new cohorts (Jones et al., 2014). Brandman researchers also cited confusion about class cancelations and rescheduling, a policy that had been outlined in the program handbook for the previous learning model (Korr et al., 2012). UNT researchers admitted that the first cohort had

misunderstood fundamental issues such as expected time commitment and tuition policies (Jones et al., 2014). Although such policy issues needed to be handled uniformly by the university administrations, at Brandman University, individual instructors found themselves seeking guidance from course developers and a variety of policies were instituted. At UNT, students, especially those in the first cohort, had some negative feelings because of the miscommunication. Some of these attitudes and perceptions "set a tone that made subsequent semesters more difficult for the first group" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 25). Lack of clarity in policies and procedures can result in frustration for all three parties, the students, the teachers, and the institution.

Charting new paths. Korr et al. (2012) began their conclusion by humbly recognizing the ambitious, perhaps overly ambitious, nature of their undertaking. They cited the limited research to guide the path, and admitted that Bradman had to, in some ways, chart its own path. Jones et al. (2014) agreed that the program still has to engage in a lot of work and development to complete the program expansion. In both articles, the research focused on the process of the transition and only touched on the perceptions of the stakeholders like faculty, administration, and students. Despite those parameters contrasting with other researchers that study blended cohorts, Korr et al. (2012) and Jones et al. (2014) cogently outlined the process that these two universities followed to transition from older, more traditional ways of instruction to a model that takes advantage of 21st century technology for the benefit of the institution and the students.

Summary

The design of blended programs is on the rise but requires a great deal of study and understanding. Institutions of higher learning are now championing the call for more empirical data connecting the theories that support the cohort model in the blended format. Much of the

research has focused on how online and classroom delivery vary in term of outcomes (Estelami, 2012); however, what has been neglected in the research is thorough examination of the blended delivery system, particularly as it applies to the cohort model. Institutions are seeking data that reveals best practices for student engagement and achievement with the goal of improving instruction and increasing retention and graduation. In the changing world of blended learning and the globalization of education, "Practice can inform theory, and in turn, that theory can then inform new learning practices" (Henriksen et al., 2014, p. 51). The key is innovation and collaboration at the faculty and institutional levels.

As many researchers have documented, redesigning on-campus courses to be accessible to hybrid students has been a significant challenge to instructors. Some universities have attempted to address these issues by creating special departments and faculty positions. Michigan State University (MSU) created the College of Education's Design Studio to provide an academic and technical resource to faculty who are teaching blended classes (Henriksen et al., 2014). Here, the goal that instructors are committed to both synchronous and asynchronous learning has received positive student feedback. Course evaluations revealed that students appreciated the innovative hybrid format and instructors' commitment to different types of learning opportunities. Surveying students within the programs as well as purposeful professional development at the faculty level appear to be emerging themes in blended cohort research.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

As stated in Chapter 1, the primary goal of this study was to test the research questions that relate to the indicators of success for a blended cohort at the doctoral level. Previously studied indicators for success of the cohort model were grounded in Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory and Mezirow and Taylor's (2009) Transformational Theory. Social Learning Theory supported the cohort model for its creation of a community of inquiry and the social support systems that arose out of cohort relationships. Transformational Theory also leaned on social relationships but considered factors in experience, personal critical reflection, and an emphasis of changed personal or professional identity over the mere acquisition of skills and knowledge.

Moving the cohort model into the 21st century world of e-learning, distance learning, or blended learning required more inquiry about what it took to be successful in this educational model. As defined in Chapter 2, a blended program employs the benefits of asynchronous and synchronous instruction through face-to-face and online modules. A blended cohort leans on the theory supporting cohort success while introducing the flexibility of online instruction. Many studies have focused on the technological, content, and service aspects of a graduate program, but emphasized quality as a significant factor. Yener (2013) pointed out that few studies have examined these aspects, particularly quality, from the learners' perspectives.

This study focused on the learners' perceptions as it sought to answer the primary and secondary questions regarding the indicators of a successful doctoral cohort that worked within the blended format. Specifically, this research studied individual cohort members, the perceptions of the cohort as a whole group, and the learners' perceptions of the doctoral program

that delivered instruction through the blended cohort model. Because of the technological emphasis of the blended program, a significant secondary research question focused on the relationship between perceived technological skills at the beginning of the program to the perceptions of students' technological skills at the end of the program. In other words, did the students believe they had the necessary technological skills at the beginning of the program, and did they believe that was an accurate assessment at the end of the program? An additional question was: Were learners transformed from practitioners to researchers through the blended cohort model?

Separate quantitative and qualitative instruments were used to test these questions. The methodology of these tests is presented in this chapter. The chapter is organized into four sections: (1) selection of participants; (2) description of instruments; (3) description of the methods for collecting data; and (4) data analysis and reporting.

Selection of Participants

In this study, a purposive sample was chosen to study a special population of blended cohort participants. Purposive sampling, also known as judgment sampling, is "the process of selecting a sample that is believed to be representative of a given population" (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012, p. 141). In addition, Lunenburg and Irby (2008) explained how purposive sampling involves the researcher's prior experience or knowledge of the group to be sampled. The target population of this study was a group of students in a blended cohort program earning a doctorate degree in educational leadership. This fact is not unique because hundreds of doctoral cohort programs exist in the United States, dozens of which can be accessed in the state of California. The exploration of this purposive sample allowed for the examination of the blended cohort model within a relatively fixed group that shared a common geographical area

and common employment. The cohort members included teachers, administrators, and counselors from one central California school district. Desiring personal and professional improvement for the individuals and the district as a whole, the participants researched a few different universities and decided as a group to enroll with a private university located in Southern California which provided a blended doctoral program. The cohort began classes in Summer 2014, and, in Winter 2016, the students concluded the 10-course instruction curriculum and the pre-dissertation phase. This cohort served as the study sample from which data was collected and conclusions were drawn. Any relevant differences in location or district demands were considered.

A unique characteristic of this sample was that all of the participants shared, at some point, common employment in the same district. In contrast, many blended programs attract students from a wide variety of employers and positions. The following is a breakdown of the cohort's sample (n=16): 9 male and 7 female. The ages of the cohort members were: 31.3% 36-40 years old; 37.5% 41-45 years old; and 25% 46 or over. In the initial survey collection, one participant preferred not to answer the question on age.

Demographic information about the district in the study was available through Ed-Data, a partnership of the California Department of Education, EdSource and the Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team/California School Information Services. Regarding the racial breakdown in the district, the statistic revealed that in 2013-2014, the district's student population was 62.6% Hispanic/Latino, 11% African American, 9.6% Asian, 7.1% White, and 9.7% Other (i.e. Filipino, Native American, Pacific Islander, and mixed racial identity). The percentage of Hispanic/Latino students rose over 5% since 2010, while the percentage declined for the other three larger racial groups - White, African American, and Asian. The English

Language (EL) percentage was 28.4% in 2014, and 85% of that population was Spanish speaking.

The high percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals, 85.6% of the total student population, suggested a low-income level of the community. This percentage indicated the eligibility for free or reduced price meals in federally-funded school nutrition programs that provide nutritionally balanced low-cost or free meals to children. Eligibility for free or reduced price meals often indicates low income and is a benchmark for further financial assistance throughout educational systems (“Student Profile,” 2015).

The Association of Realtors (2015) provided demographic information that revealed the educational levels and average income of the households within the district. Of those residents who reported their level of education, 23.3% had no high school education and 21.2% received some high school education. Of the 55.5% of people who continued their education after the high school level, less than 25% reported earning any post-secondary degrees: 9% Associate’s Degree; 11% Bachelor’s Degree; and 5.7% Graduate Degree ("XXXXXX Unified School District," 2015). The average household income was reported as $58,087 with the median income being $43,143, considerably lower than the $60,185 median household income in the state of California ("California Median Household Income," 2015). Finally, consumer spending in the district fell below the national average with consumer spending on education being 82% of the national average.

Instrumentation

Before an instrument was adopted that would measure the indicators of success for a cohort member, group, and program, first a definition of success had to be determined. One obvious indicator for success of an individual was completion of the degree program. According

to the Council of Graduate Schools PhD Completion Project released in 2010, approximately 50% of doctoral students complete their program, which leaves a 50% attrition rate (Stewart, 2011). While various reasons may contribute to whether or not an individual successfully completes a doctoral program, finishing with a degree can be examined as an indicator of success. Other measures of success may include the individual's perceived quality of learning and transformation from an educational practitioner to an educational researcher (Rhodes, 2013).

Advocates of the cohort model often tout the social benefits as reasons for students' success. The relational aspects of a cohort can be encouraging to members, spurring them on to complete their coursework while developing "a lifetime kinship with other members of the class" (Nimer, 2009, p. 3). Drago-Severson et al., (2001) researched the social connections of collaborative cohorts and labeled cohorts as *holding environments* in the group structure, supporting the individual learner with personal support, a challenging learning environment, and stability of membership. Based on the social and relational aspects of a cohort, a measure of success for a group may be perceived closeness with fellow members and trust that cohort members will be encouraging and collaborative along the way.

Interestingly, in a study that investigated what PhD graduates from the late 1990s thought about their doctoral program quality, a little over half perceived the excellence in abstract quality to be the most important factor (Morrison et al., 2011). Respondents who were trained at elite research institutions were much more likely to hold that opinion about the success of the program. A little less than half held the belief that other factors, such as professional collaboration and socialization, particularly in the cohort model, were as important as the academic rigors. "A program's reputation for scholarly quality clearly does not predict well respondents' evaluation of their own PhD program as *excellent*" (Morrison et al., 2011, p. 544).

Because the sample cohort for this study and the university affiliation would not consider their program as coming from an elite research institution, the study measured the success of the program by the learners' perceived value and quality as well as the outcomes cited by the accrediting body.

The university granted the researcher access to this cohort in order to further explore the blended cohort model. A survey titled "Doctoral Cohort Information Sheet" was administered to the entire cohort during their inaugural face-to-face class. The first survey instrument had both quantitative and qualitative aspects that measured several characteristics of the participants. The survey was separated into four informational categories including demographics, technology, cohort experience, and school district. The demographic information was used for descriptive statistics.

The technological information section began with four questions about the age of the participants' computers, any intention to purchase new computers, active participation in social media, and general history of receiving computer training. These questions provided data that would be used in comparative statistics. Also included in the technological section were four quantitative questions in which the participants rated their digital skills and comfort levels with digital applications. These questions were presented in a Likert scale with five choices: (1) Very poor; (2) Below average; (3) Average; (4) Above average; and (5) Excellent. These scores were used to analyze technology proficiency as a factor for individual student success.

Following the technological questions, five open-ended questions gathered data about the individuals' motivation for entering the program – *What is your purpose for entering this doctoral program?* - and some early perceptions about an online blended cohort – *Have you ever participated in an online or blended academic program? If yes, what were some of the*

benefits/drawbacks of the online or blended format? If no, what do you anticipate will be some of the benefits/drawbacks of the online or blended format? These questions attempted to acquire any early participant perceptions about the online blended cohorts. Another question asked how they reacted when others struggle with technology. The final questions in this section asked for respondents to anticipate how many hours per week they expected to dedicate to the program, what other demands also required personal attention, and sources of support on which individuals can rely. individuals can rely. The qualitative questions were intended to gather data about the participants' perceptions about technology and personal support at the start of the program because those themes would again be examined toward the end of their academic program.

In another quantitative portion of this survey, participants were asked if they had ever participated in an online or blended academic program before which would be used as an indicator of past satisfaction and future success. Also, they were asked to check off significant demands on their time that may distract them from doctoral work, and these checks may lead to frequency statistics that may be used comparatively. Finally, in this section there were four quantitative questions in which the participants rated their comfort levels with working in a collaborative cohort online, and face-to-face. These questions were presented in a Likert scale with five choices: (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Neither agree nor disagree; (4) Agree; and (5) Strongly agree. These scores were used to analyze participants' feelings about the social characteristics of a cohort model, including perceived comfort levels with groups, online participation, the technological demands, and helping others who may struggle with technological proficiency.

The final section about school district information was mostly included for the institution's research, but the ten questions produced a score that reflected the participants' perceptions of their district and their motivation for higher learning. These questions were presented in a Likert scale with five choices: (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Neither agree nor disagree; (4) Agree; and (5) Strongly agree. The quantitative questions focused on the participants' understanding of the issues that the district and the various departments face, their belief that they could have an impact on policy and help the district to become "more adept at helping all students," and their perception of how the district's administration values cooperative problem-solving, open communication, and the opinions of faculty and staff. The one open-ended, qualitative question asked: *Do you think that this doctoral program will help your school district? Why or why not?* The responses to this question revealed a theme of leveraging collective capacity through higher learning.

The exact same survey was given at the beginning of the final class in the coursework phase of the doctoral program. It served as a post-test given to collect data about the characteristics of the individual participants and the cohort as a group, near the completion of the doctoral coursework. Again, the questions tested the cohort structure, technological skills and comfort, mechanisms for personal support during stressful times, and other demographic information. This instrument relied almost entirely on quantitative Likert scale questions with five possible scores; however, open-ended questions allowed respondents more freedom to express their opinions and thoughts on the topic of individual, group, and program success. The eight quantitative questions from the original survey were replicated to conduct a paired t-test to measure change. The four questions about technology and the four questions about cohort comfort and engagement were identical to the original survey. Open-ended follow-up questions

included inquiry into the participants' perceived change and growth throughout the coursework as delivered through the blended cohort model.

After the surveys were collected (Appendix B), open-ended interviews with the cohort members allowed the researcher to probe for deeper answers to questions that directly correlated to the main research questions about indicators of a successful cohort member, cohort group, and blended cohort program (Appendix C). For example, participants were asked to comment on how the social culture of the cohort supported the individual members throughout the coursework. Another question asked participants to discuss the role of technology in the blended program and how students who struggled with the technological aspects were supported by the group and by the program. Participants were also asked to reflect on the impact, positive and/or negative, of the institution's faculty and administration on the individuals and the group as a whole. Finally, participants were asked to comment on how the blended cohort model could be improved for the success of the individual, the group, and the program. Through the semi-structured interviews, qualitative evidence was gathered to help answer the research question about what makes a successful blended cohort.

The degree to which an instrument measures what it claims to measure is called validity (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). Attention to validity was given using a variety of methods that are described by Creswell (2013). *Prolonged engagement and persistent observation*: Months of planning and data collection included a trip to the cohort location, in-person observation, and significant time recording and transcribing the data. *Triangulation of data:* Making use of multiple methods (quantitative and qualitative) and theories through synthesis of the literature and understanding of the philosophical frameworks allowed the researcher to approach the phenomenon through multiple perspectives and, therefore, gain deep understanding.

Clarification of researcher bias through self-reflection: The reflexivity of the researcher was a critical element in this phenomenological approach. Bracketing helped to reduce researcher bias, but a deeply revealing analysis of the researcher's own experience, including how the past experience impacted the analysis and understanding of the phenomenon was crucial. *Member checking (writ large):* The participants were given a chance to judge the accuracy and credibility of the account. Their names were protected with participant labels, but each participant knew which label belonged to him/her. None of the participants who followed up with the researcher about the member checking felt they had been misinterpreted or misrepresented. Expert peer reviewing was also utilized through the dissertation committee approval process. *Rich, thick descriptions:* Because of the common experience with the phenomenon and the relationship with the university overseeing the cohort of study, the researcher needed to provide exhaustive and detailed accounts of the study.

There were two main ethical issues with this study. The first had to do with the fact that the researcher was also in a blended cohort offered by the same university as the study sample. There was a discussion about whether the researcher would feel pressured to show the university in a glowing light. Removing certain key administrators of the program from the dissertation team was one way of protecting against interference. Also, studying a cohort that was from a very different geographical location helped to mitigate that tension.

The second issue centered on the researcher's own biases in the same cohort structure and, in fact, the same course of study. Biases and anticipated outcomes could have been harmful to the objectivity of the study and the data. According to Edmonson and Irby (2008), "[The researcher] must not be so concerned about being in control of [his] own personal perspectives, paralyzed to move forward in research" (p. 62). Instead, the researcher should simply

acknowledge his or her own perspective within the context of the study. Creswell's (2013) instructions regarding epoche, or bracketing, helped to put the researcher's personal experience to use, strengthening the reflexivity of research and providing a structure for data collection objectivity.

Data Collection

This study employed a mixed methodology strategy in which both quantitative and qualitative data was collected. The first step in the data collection process included obtaining permission to survey the cohort from the institution delivering the doctoral program. Because the researcher was still working on doctoral coursework, a professor of the program invited the researcher to join a research proposal that would collect data at the start of the new cohort. The members of the new cohort would have zero contact or interaction with the researcher's cohort because of the geographical distance, the lack of professional overlap, and the difference in targeted completion dates of the program. The researcher completed a course in research training through the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and received permission by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to co-write and administer the survey to the new cohort members.

A survey was handed to each of the 16 members of the cohort at their first face-to-face session. All of the students participated in filling out the survey titled "Doctoral Cohort Information Sheet" (Appendix B). Once completed, surveys were anonymously placed in a manila envelope. Results of the survey were collected by the professor at the session and mailed to the researcher. Each survey was labeled with a number, the questions were coded into SPSS (Pallant, 2013), and the responses were recorded. This survey provided a pre-test that provided baseline data that would be compared with a post-test at the end of the participants' program.

The researcher created a proposal to conduct research which was approved by the IRB of the institution. Then, participant consent was sought to conduct quantitative and qualitative research, ensuring the anonymity of the informants. Data was collected at the end of 2015 and the beginning of 2016. As previously explained, the quantitative questions from the pre-test were re-administered for the post-test to conduct paired t-tests. For the qualitative portion of this study, three data collection techniques were used: (1) observing; (2) administering surveys with open-ended questions (Appendix B); and (3) semi-structured interviewing (Appendix C). The participants were observed, and their behaviors were recorded, by a non-participant observer. The researcher joined in a Friday night social gathering for the purpose of looking for behaviors that might be related to the research grounded in Social Learning Theory. Observations were also made of the cohort during a Saturday face-to-face session to document the interactions between the students and the professor, and the students with each other. Detailed field notes recorded insights for future analysis and the researcher used QuickTime Player to record telephone interviews.

Semi-structured, open-ended interviews with the participants allowed the researcher to probe more deeply in areas directly correlated to the research questions (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). Additionally, because the researcher was enrolled in a doctoral program at the same university, the institution's cohort handbook was examined as archival data in the form of the institution's outcomes. Finally, a field log was used to provide a detailed account of the data collection opportunities as well as the thoughts, feelings, experiences, and perceptions experienced throughout the process.

Data Analysis

Because this study utilized a mixed-methods approach to research, data analysis included quantitative tests and measurements using SPSS (Pallant, 2013) as well as a systematic analysis of the qualitative data. The qualitative analysis of data involved extensive immersion into the details of the data as the researcher coded and categorized, reflected and interpreted. "Coding involved assignment of set codes to certain characteristics or recurring themes within [the] data" (Edmonson & Irby, 2008, p. 97). Moving beyond coding, five to seven themes revealed common experiences, perceptions, and ideas (Creswell, 2013). Unlike the quantitative data, "The researcher [did] not search for the exhaustive and mutually exclusive categories of the statistician but, instead, [identified] the salient, grounded categories of meaning held by participants in the setting" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 154). Those categories of meaning correlated with the research questions by focusing on participants' perceptions of success for the individual, perceptions of success for the group, and perceptions of success for the institution's doctoral program. The themes also correlated with the learning theories and frameworks that grounded the literature surrounding the cohort model, such as andragogy, social learning, transformational learning, situated learning, and community of inquiry. Finally, themes emerged that revealed perceptions about technological skills at the start of the program and how those skills changed over the course of the program.

The method of coding for this research involved abbreviations of key words. For example, data that related to perceptions of cohort success received the following codes:

S-IND	Indicators of success for an individual in the cohort
S-COH	Indicators of success for the cohort as a group
S-INST	Indicators of success for the institution's program

Data that related to perceptions of technological proficiency, improvement, or lack thereof for the individual, the group, or the program (including the faculty and delivery) received the following codes:

T-IND	Perceptions of the individual's technological proficiency
T-COH	Perceptions of the cohort group's technological proficiency
T- INST	Perceptions of the institution's (faculty) technological proficiency

Data that related to the central theories that ground the literature of the cohort model and the blended cohort method received the following codes:

ADULT	Correlated with Adult Learning Theory (Knowles, 1979)
SOCIAL	Correlated with Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977)
TRANSF	Correlated with Transformative Theory (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009)
SITUATED	Correlated with Situated Learning Theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991)
CoI	Correlated with community of inquiry framework (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008)

In the analysis, the researcher began by describing personal experiences in an attempt to set aside researcher bias while delving deeply into the literature and theory attached to the phenomenon. What was first developed was a list of significant statements accumulated through the survey responses and interview feedback. Out of these statements the meaning units or themes were identified (Creswell, 2013). Incorporating verbatim examples and direct quotes, the researcher included thick description of the phenomenon and the participants' perceptions of the experience. Once a description of the *what* and the *how* of the phenomenon was composed, the details were analyzed to reveal the *why* of the study, including the significance of the learners' experiences and perceptions for future researchers to study.

Data were analyzed using SPSS (Pallant, 2013) Version 22 for each of the respondents. Nonparametric data, demographic data, and parametric data ranging from 1 to 5 were input. The SPSS program was used to run statistical tests including descriptive statistics and comparative t-tests. In this study's sample, the descriptive statistics included the cohort members' ages and genders. These details not only helped to summarize the sample in a succinct way, but also helped create a visual of the sample while maintaining participants' anonymity.

Paired sample t-tests were used because the research provided two sets of data, a pre-and post-test. Paired sample t-tests are generally used in 'before-after' studies, or when the samples are the matched pairs, to know whether or not the training or intervention had any impact on the learner. In this study, the cohort participants were given a survey at the beginning of their doctoral program that collected demographic data as well as parametric data about the learners' comfort with technology and the cohort model. A paired t-test was generated through SPSS (Pallant, 2013) to compare the mean scores at the start of the cohort program to the mean scores at the end of the cohort program. In other words, did the learner's proficiency and comfort with technology and the cohort model increase from the start of the blended program? Because the same survey was administered at the conclusion of the program, a paired t-test could detect if there was significant change in the mean scores.

Paired-samples t-tests are accompanied by an assumption that must be checked, and additional statistical tests, like a multiple regression, would be beneficial to increase the validity of the data. Unfortunately, with this small selective sample, a regression would not be possible; however, in future research, after more cohorts have been studied, a multiple regression could be used to tell how well a set of variables is able to predict a particular outcome.

Summary

This chapter restated the purpose of this research and the research questions. The 16 participants were chosen because of their unique situation and experience as a cohort of doctoral students in one specific school district, instead of being from a variety of geographical areas or school districts. The validity and reliability of the instruments were presented, including the methods for triangulating the findings. The data collection procedures were also discussed in this chapter with particular emphasis on multiple methods and rich description. Finally, the methods of data analysis for the research questions were presented, including analysis of the survey, the observation, and the interviews. Results of the data analysis are presented in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

This study intended to investigate the research questions that related to the indicators of success for a blended doctoral cohort and the perspectives of its members. The data originated from pre and post-test surveys that featured demographic, quantitative, and qualitative questions. After the participants signed consent forms (Appendix A), the researcher met with the participants to observe one of their face-to-face classes and a social gathering. The researcher followed up those observations with one-on-one phone interviews that lasted approximately one hour each. During the interviews, the researcher asked open-ended questions and collected data that responded to the research questions and provided a narrative for the participants' individual experiences in the doctoral cohort program. While the responses were as varied as the individuals in the cohort, some repetitive themes emerged. The purpose of this study was achieved by analyzing the responses of the cohort participants at the start of their doctoral cohort coursework and at the end of the coursework phase, and it was achieved by the honest perceptions of those who chose to participate in the open-ended interviews. This chapter presents the results of the data analysis.

Descriptive Statistics

The target population of this study was a group of students in a blended cohort program earning a doctorate degree in educational leadership, including teachers, administrators, and counselors from one central California location. The descriptive statistics were first reported in the survey title "Doctoral Cohort Information Sheet" that was administered during the inaugural weekend of the doctoral program.

The cohort consisted of 16 students: 9 males and 7 females, all over the age of 35. At the start of the program, 100% of the cohort members worked within the same school district either as teachers, site administrators, instructional coaches, or district administrators; during the coursework phase of the doctoral program, two cohort members left that district for positions in other districts.

Table 1

Participant Ages

Age	Pre-test	Post-test
36-40	6	1
41-45	6	7
46 and over	4	8

The Survey

After the section titled "Demographic Information," the survey was divided into three sections: (1) Technology Information; (2) Cohort Information; and (3) School District Information. Each of these sections reported parametric statistics and qualitative data that helped answer the research questions. The same survey was administered at the beginning of the last class in the two-year coursework phase of the doctoral program. Paired *t*-tests revealed where there was significant change. The findings of each section are reported together; however, the qualitative data is separated from the quantitative data with specific headings.

Technology Information

Quantitative data. The first main section of the survey contained questions about technology access and usage. The first question asked the age of the participant's computer/laptop. At the time of the pre-test, 67% of the students had a computer/laptop that was between 1-3 years old; 33% had a computer that was between 4-5 years old. However, 38% of

the participants indicated that they planned to buy a new computer/laptop within a few months. After two years, 75% indicated that their computer/laptop was between 1-3 years old which indicated that participants updated their technology. Of the cohort, 56% responded that they had previously sought out computer application training and of those, 78% said they sought training 1-3 times per year. Moreover, 22% of respondents said they sought training four or more times per year. After two years, 63% indicated that they had sought out computer training, and 89% of those said they sought training 1-3 times per year. This change indicates an increase in technology training.

There were four Likert-scale questions that collected data about how the participants rated their digital skills: 1=Very Poor; 2=Below Average; 3=Average; 4=Above Average; and 5=Excellent. The scores for the mean and standard deviation are recorded in Table 2. The average scores were used to conduct a paired *t*-test to reveal any significant change between the pre-test and the post-test. There was no significant change in the total Technology Score from the pre-test (M=3.50, SD=.84) to the post-test (M=3.86, SD=.69), t (15) = -1.42, p = .18 (two-tailed). The mean increase in the Technology Score was .36 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -.90 to .18. The eta squared statistic (*Cohen's d*) = -.47 indicated a medium effect size.

Table 2

Participants' Rating of Digital Skills

Question	Pre-test M(SD)	Post-test M(SD)
Internet browsing	4.13 (0.81)	4.38 (0.62)
Cloud storage	3.06 (1.29)	3.38 (1.02)
Presentation applications	3.38 (1.36)	3.89 (0.89)
Social Media	3.44 (1.03)	3.81 (1.22)
Digital Skill Average	3.50 (0.84)	3.86 (0.69)

Qualitative data. The second section of the survey contained open-ended questions about the doctoral program, the participants' beliefs about the blended cohort model, and the participants' expectations for the presumed workload. It also asked questions about other significant demands on the participants' time as well as their perceived sources of support through the program. The qualitative data was analyzed for common themes which are reported with direct quotations. The various sections of the survey are identified in this chapter with headings.

***Purpose for entering the program*.** The first question asked the participants their purpose for entering the program. At the time of the pre-test, participants' answers fell into 5 main categories: (1) Be a strong educational leader; (2) Increase my expertise in the field; (3) Intrinsic motivation to further my education (lifelong learning); (4) To make a positive difference in my community; and (5) To advance my career (in the district or as a professor). The most popular response, with 44% of the respondents indicating this choice, dealt with the intrinsic and personal motivation to further one's education through lifelong learning. One participant wrote, "I entered this doctoral program to continue my education (always learning) and to be able to be a *player at the table*." Mentioned by 38% of the participants was being a strong educational leader and advancing one's career. Written responses included the following: "I want to better prepare myself as an educational leader and to become an expert in my field;" "To possibly use the degree to teach at the university level;" and, "To continue to expand my level of knowledge in the world of education, and to provide me future opportunities for higher levels of employment."

After two years in the program, the theme of *earning a doctoral degree as a step toward lifelong learning* jumped to 63% and was the most common response. When asked what the

purpose for entering the program was, one participant responded, "A new challenge, further knowledge, pursue an area of interest, and to be able to make change. Knowledge and credentials." Others simply responded, "I am a lifelong learner," and, "Personal growth." One person mentioned "the cost of the program" as being an attractive reason, and another shared that he would be "the first in my family to have a doctorate."

Perceived benefits and drawbacks of a blended format. At the time of the pre-test, 44% of the participants indicated they had participated in an online or blended academic program before. Of those surveyed, 56% had not. The perceived benefits fell into two main categories: (1) Flexibility and convenience; and (2) Collaborative nature of the cohort model. The percentage of the participants who mentioned flexibility and convenience was 88%, and 38% mentioned the collaborative nature of the cohort. Of the participants who commented on flexibility and convenience, one participant wrote, "I will have access to the social and collaborative benefits of the classroom while having the flexibility of online learning." Others shared, "This program will allow me to be at home and not require childcare," and, "The opportunity to collaborate from home, my office, etc., while still receiving a quality education." On the post-test, flexibility and convenience again was the overwhelming response with 69%. Only 6% of the respondents responded that the collaborative nature of the cohort was a benefit. Phrases such as "time and accessibility," "work from the comforts of work or home," "less time away from family," and "saving valuable time" reflected the appreciation for the flexibility of the blended delivery (Gardner, 2000; Korr et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2014; Sogunro, 2015; Giannoukous et al., 2015).

When asked about drawbacks about a blended format, three main categories of response were revealed in the pre-test: (1) Technological struggles or dislikes; (2) Need for time-

management and self-motivation; and (3) Lack of personal connection. The percentage of participants who felt the lack of personal connection would be the biggest drawback of the blended model was 44%. One participant thought the "lack of connectedness with colleagues and professors" would be a drawback. Others used the phrases "lack of interaction" or "no people-to-people" to express the same sentiment. Those who felt concerned about technological issues reflected 25% of the responses. Staying on top of the new technologies that would be presented and facing "tech glitches" reflected those apprehensions. Combining concerns about the technology and the lack of personal connection, one person wrote, "I don't like to see myself on the computer and I prefer face-to-face learning." The comment, "Time will be the major drawback. I plan on spending the necessary hours, but they will need to be early mornings and late evenings," reflected the 19% who were concerned about their individual time-management skills. Another participant wrote about the time commitment, in conjunction with a trepidation that people outside of the cohort might lack understanding of the process. Concerns were shared about "time required and others not understanding that just because you are not *in* school does not mean that you are not *at* school." A concern about keeping the cohesiveness of the group was revealed when one person wrote, "I wonder how our large cohort will remain together when we are broken up into smaller teams and groups."

On the post-test, 50% of the participants agreed that a lack of personal connection was a drawback of a blended program, and 13% still cited individual time-management skills. Some written responses included the following: "Sometimes it is better to have a one-on-one approach;" "There was less accountability;" and "Access to teachers for questions and social interaction" could be lacking. A new theme emerged on the post-test for perceived drawbacks; confusion about assignments and learning modules was cited by 38% of the cohort members.

Reflecting this theme, one participant wrote, “Not enough information was provided via instructional modules.” Another participant cited there was “some confusion at times regarding assignment due dates and class meetings, but that was only at the beginning of the program.” Finally, one person reflected that “some courses, like Statistics, are difficult using this model.” No participants mentioned technological problems on the post-test.

Dealing with peers’ technological struggles. Because technological proficiency is a significant requirement for success in a blended cohort model, participants were asked to comment on how they felt when others around them struggled with technology. The responses revealed three main themes: (1) I want/need to help them; (2) I feel empathy because I’ve been there, too; and (3) I feel frustrated. In both the pre and post-tests, 69% of the cohort felt that they wanted and/or needed to help those who struggled and they provided responses such as “try to help,” “happy/obliged to assist,” and “the need and importance to assist.” The other two categories decreased slightly; empathy went from 25% to 19%, and frustration went from 13% to 6%. A more empathetic participant shared, “I’m sure – and hope – they would do the same for me or someone else.” Others shared that they felt “not so alone,” and connected to a “kindred spirit” because they felt they had “their anguish at times.” Regarding more perturbed feelings, some participants simply wrote the word “frustrated,” and another participant shared, “I believe it is a basic skill that should already be in their skill set.” One participant had a more ambivalent response when he wrote, “Indifferent. If they want my help, I will help. Otherwise, it’s okay with me.”

The doctoral workload. Three of the qualitative questions about the cohort model focused on the anticipated workload, what other demands were on participants’ shoulders, and sources of support that they identified would help them through the doctoral program. In the

survey, 44% anticipated dedicating 10-20 hours/week; 32% anticipated more than 20 hours/week; and 25% anticipated between 5-10 hours/week. The only change in those percentages was in the 20+ category; that dropped from 32% to 19%. This data reflects that the cohort members had realistic expectations of the time commitment required for doctoral study.

In the pre-test, participants mentioned four main sources of support: (1) Colleagues and/or Cohort members = 88%; (2) Friends = 44%; (3) Family= 69%; and (4) Professors/Institution = 38%. There was no change for Colleagues and/or Cohort Members and family; they stayed at 88% and 69%. Friends dropped to 6% in the post-test, Professors/Institution increased to 44%, and a new category emerged: The Internet = 19%. Regarding that new category, while some simply wrote "websites" or "Internet," one participant included that the "writing assignments encouraged online/database research in several unfamiliar areas."

Cohort Information

Quantitative Data. Of the surveyed participants, 38% said they had prior experience in a learning cohort. Following that question, there were four Likert-scale questions that collected data about how the participants felt about working in a blended cohort group: 1=Strongly Disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Neither Agree nor Disagree; 4=Agree; and 5= Strongly Agree. The scores for the mean and standard deviation are recorded in Table 3. The average scores were used to conduct a paired *t*-test to reveal any significant change between the pre-test and the post-test. There is a significant change in the total Cohort Score from the pre-test (M=4.13, SD=.55) to the post-test (M=4.53, SD=.40), t (15) = -2.47, p = .026 (two-tailed). The mean increase in the Cohort Score was .41 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from .76 to .056. The eta squared statistic (*Cohen's d*) = .86 indicated a large effect size.

Table 3

Participant Perceptions on Blended Cohort Experience

Question	Pre-test M(SD)	Post-test M(SD)
Face-to-face groups	4.63 (0.50)	4.81 (0.40)
Online groups	3.81 (1.05)	4.63 (0.81)
Proficiency of others	3.88 (0.72)	4.00 (0.89)
Willingness to help	4.19 (0.83)	4.69 (0.60)
Blended Cohort Experience Average	4.13 (0.55)	4.53 (0.40)

School District Information

Qualitative Data. The final section of the survey contained questions about the participants' perceptions of their school district and how the participants believed they could positively impact the district through the doctoral program. The first question asked, "Do you think that this doctoral program will help your school district? Why or why not?" One hundred percent of the participants agreed that their participation in the doctoral program would help their school district. This percentage was the same in the pre and post-tests. Three main themes emerged in the open-ended responses: (1) The capacity of district leaders to lead professional development; (2) Demonstrate how a committed group can work collaboratively; and (3) Create positive change for students in the district. In the pre-test, the capacity of the district leaders to lead others was mentioned in 69% of the surveys. Responses included the following: "Build collaboration within district staff;" and "We are building capacity from within." Demonstrating the commitment of the group was mentioned in 25% with phrases such as "very committed and motivated group," "like-minded educational leaders," and "leaders focused together." Enacting positive change for students was mentioned by 44% of respondents with common ideas such as "focus on learning," "student achievement," "shared vision," and "advancing the quality of the district." One participant blended all three themes together when she wrote, "The cohort can

help propel organizational goals as well as the development of future educational leaders with the end result being improved student achievement."

In the post-test, the second theme about the committed group dropped from 25% to 6%. This drop did not seem to reflect the group's dedication to or support of the committed group; rather, this drop may have reflected that the committed group became a given fact that did not require more embellishment. Instead, those surveyed were moving forward as a group and looking ahead toward greater district issues. The other two themes about professional leadership and positive change received equal responses at 56%. This change reflected the doctoral students' journey into the dissertation phase and the fact that many of the dissertations were focused on student achievement. For example, one participant agreed that the doctoral program would help the district and wrote, "[It will] further enhance the needs of all 39,000 students as many of my cohort members have dissertation topics that will affect all of the students." Another wrote, "Our research is based on areas that impact our students, staff, and community." Another similar response shared, "Everyone in the cohort is targeting a dissertation topic that directly benefits our school district." Some participants responded with comments that reflected a broader sense of growth. For example, one wrote, "It will help any district;" "The result will be more employees with greater experience and capacity;" and "I selected a topic that districts are interested in and I am personally vested in it."

Quantitative Data. There were 10 Likert-scale questions that collected data about how the participants felt about school district issues: 1=Strongly Disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Neither Agree nor Disagree; 4=Agree; and 5= Strongly Agree. The scores for the means and standard deviations are recorded in Table 4. There is no significant change in the total District Score from the pre-test (M=3.78, SD=.50) to the post-test (M=3.96, SD=.47), t (15) = -1.42, p = .18 (two-

tailed). The mean increase in the District Score was .18 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -.45 to .069. The eta squared statistic (*Cohen's d*) = -.366 indicated a somewhat small effect size.

Table 4

Participant Responses to School District Questions

Question	Pre-test M(SD)	Post-test M(SD)
This program will help (Yes/No)	1.00 (0.00)	1.00 (0.00)
Issues facing the district	4.50 (0.52)	4.69 (0.48)
Impact on decisions	3.69 (1.14)	4.06 (1.06)
Know people in other departments	4.50 (0.52)	4.81 (0.40)
Department's issues important to administration	4.13 (0.72)	4.06 (0.93)
Administration as a cohesive unit	2.69 (1.01)	3.25 (1.00)
Administration values opinions	3.38 (0.62)	3.63 (0.96)
I can help the district	4.50 (0.52)	4.31 (0.60)
Issues facing other departments	3.91 (0.78)	3.94 (0.77)
Cooperative problem solving	3.38 (1.15)	3.44 (0.96)
Open communication between departments	3.13 (1.09)	3.38 (1.15)
School District Questions Average	3.78 (0.50)	3.96 (0.47)

Researcher Observations

On Friday, December 18, 2015, the researcher drove north from the Los Angeles area to the area where the participants lived and worked. The researcher met with a professor to discuss the timeline of the weekend. Also discussed was the possible halo effect that could bias the data. According to Gay et al. (2012), a halo effect is the psychological phenomenon in which initial impressions about an individual or an experience, either positive or negative, affect subsequent impressions and biases. It was possible that the participants' views about the cohort and the program may be overly positive because they were feeling proud that they had reached this benchmark in the process. Similarly, it was possible that the participants' views may be negatively tainted because of fatigue after 10 rigorous courses, or because of a particular struggle with a peer or a professor. One way to mitigate the possibility of the halo effect was to wait a

few months before conducting the personal interviews; another method was to ask participants to provide examples of negative experiences within the program, admitting that there were pros and cons to the cohort model and the blended doctoral experience.

That Friday evening, the group gathered at a local Mexican restaurant and they invited the researcher and their two professors. Usually, they met on Friday nights for a voluntary study group, but on this night, the eve of the beginning of their final course, the cohort decided to celebrate their accomplishments. While this was not a formal observational opportunity, the researcher noted the friendliness and openness of the cohort. Many participants asked about the study and how their participation would fit in. They also asked questions about the dissertation process as they were at the beginning of that part of their program. Mostly, however, they all shared funny stories about their schools and families. The researcher observed how much they enjoyed each other and how happy they were to be moving forward in their doctoral journeys.

On Saturday morning, the researcher introduced herself to the group and requested consent. All participants gave their consent to be observed and 100% completed the post-test.

The setting of the cohort's face-to-face meeting was a professional development center within the school district. The meeting space was a medium-sized square room with 12 round-tables that could comfortably seat 6-8 people. There were three large screens around the room so that students could view PowerPoint notes from any direction. While the room could hold over 100 people, the small group of students and professors could comfortably spread out. Of the 15 students, 11 sat at their own tables and four shared tables with another cohort member.

The 16-member cohort had one student attending class via a computer because she was out of town at a conference. A laptop was setup so that the student could see and hear the professor and vice versa, and, at times, her screen was projected to one of the large screens so

that everyone in the group could see and hear her. When she needed to interact with classmates, her laptop was easily turned toward her group. This element confirmed the flexibility of the blended cohort because this student was not left out of the learning and the discussion just because she was out of the state.

This face-to-face class was the first time the cohort met with this professor for this class, so there were some opening activities including discussion of an inspirational Psalm and an object-lesson about observation and collecting qualitative data. In the lesson, students paired up and shared five items from their bags or pockets. Even the student who was attending digitally paired up with a cohort member. Students were not allowed to talk at all; instead, they had to draw conclusions based on the archival evidence. While they were not supposed to make any sound, it was difficult for the participants to repress their laughter. This group appeared to be very congenial, a detail that was revealed in several of the phone interviews and emerged as a common theme for the group's success (Bandura, 1977; Blackley & Sheffield, 2015; Halloway & Alexandre, 2012; Maher, 2005; Ward, 2014).

After the warm up exercise, students returned to their original seats and readied themselves for instruction as they started this last class of their doctoral coursework. All students brought laptops to the class, but only 10 students had them open; the other five appeared to prefer to focus on the instructor rather than the agenda or syllabus on their computer screens. One student was on her phone under the table. The professor shared his cell phone and home phone numbers with the class before reviewing the syllabus. The openness of the instructor to communicate in multiple ways and times was also revealed in subsequent interviews.

Much of the early discussion was about expanding on the previous class and moving forward toward the participants' primary dissertation proposals. One student asked, "So, we're

basically expanding on what we're doing with our last professor?" The new professor responded "Yes." There were many questions about moving to the next step and the defense of the proposal. Students were asking for specifics like, "Can you tell me the number of pages it should be?" At this point, almost every eye was up and focused on the professor which indicated the group's attention on the topic and the dissertation process. Four of the participants, three of whom were identified by their peers as group leaders, conducted side conversations.

After about 15 minutes, the professor moved everyone into three groups and he started a new silent activity that involved a card game. The student streaming digitally could not participate in this activity and so she was told to be an observer. The students had to read the printed directions for the game and then begin. What they did not know was that there were multiple versions of directions to highlight the theme of the activity: *Who makes the rules?* One table used non-verbal cues and deferred to the judgement and leadership of one person; another table also used nonverbal cues such as hand signals, and they appeared to laugh and smile through the chaos; the final table deviated from the instruction to remain silent and participated in table talk to clarify the rules. While all tables seemed to have fun together, especially in rounds two and three, the loudest table seemed to show more frustration and competitiveness.

The professor asked the group to mix up and start the game again. This time there was less laughter and more confusion and frustration because the accepted norms from one table did not travel to another. One student had a face of disbelief and crossed her arms in a sign of reluctance to move forward. After a few minutes, however, she begrudgingly joined the game again. This observation reflected her understanding that she had to join the cognitive presence of the group. One student, who had taken the lead at her previous table, was not accepted as the leader at another table. Whereas she felt in control of the game at one table, she was not in

control at another, and she was reduced to throwing up her hands and laughing. Another student finally broke the silence and loudly said, "My colleagues do not know how to play cards!" Her comment received a bout of laughter from the group, but it was quickly followed by another exacerbated exchange when one participant shouted, "It said aces low!" and the person he was talking to shouted back with, "No, they're high!"

Finally, the professor ended the experience and revealed that each table had different rules. Understanding comments of "Ah ha" and "Oh, that makes more sense" came from the participants. The professor asked the students to share their experiences and they revealed that they felt some resignation to proceed without clear rules and some frustration about the outcome. One shared that he felt an urgency to communicate and a growing frustration coming out of the players. Another shared that she just followed the others' leads but that she felt invalidated. The professor shared his perceptions of commotion and comfortability. After having collected interview data in which the participants shared their sense of congeniality and shared focus to finish the program together, with no one left behind, the activity was an interesting example of how this group looked to and deferred to leaders in times of stress and confusion. It also revealed their competitive natures, another theme confirmed in the interviews, and their desire for clear expectations.

After the card game, the professor started to expound on his PowerPoint lecture that was planned for the day's face-to-face learning. The student streaming in on the computer spoke up and complained that she was still facing the students, not the professor; her camera was adjusted. It was easy to forget about her presence in the room, but she was willing to speak up and stay engaged in this format. Perhaps less than ideal, the digital solution to her absence was not only an example of the flexibility of the blended cohort, but also an example of the group's

cohesiveness and support for each other's progress and success. During this more traditional delivery of instruction, some students continued to engage and others did not. One person was very focused on what he was doing on his laptop and one was focused on her phone; however, most students did pay attention when one of their peers was talking or asking a question. They engaged in a provocative discussion about the plight of English language learners (ELLs) within their district, and they tried to apply the earlier exercise to their students. One-third of their district is designated ELL and this observation reflected another theme that further emerged in the interview data: the group's desire to apply their learning to their profession in relevant ways.

After a break, the students went back to their tables and engaged in small group conversations. Then, the professor embarked on a 45-minute presentation. There were only two questions during the presentation and both attempted to connect the material to the dissertation proposal process. The professor answered the questions, but he was reluctant to deviate from the presentation too much. Overall, the class listened quietly while also looking at the textbook, typing on laptops, and researching on the Internet. The researcher observed that the energy of the group was beginning to wan as they had been together for over six hours by this time. The class concluded with some group discussion about research articles. The researcher observed that the cohort members were more likely to engage with each other than they were to engage with the professor. This observation could be due to their tight professional and personal relationships that began before, and may likely continue after the program.

Analysis of the Interview Findings

Of the 16 cohort members, 12 agreed to participate in a follow-up telephone interview. Of the four that did not participate, two requested to not be involved in that part of the data collection; however, the other two, who agreed to participate in a follow-up interview, did not

respond to multiple scheduling requests by the researcher. It was unfortunate that all cohort members did not participate in the open-ended interview because their responses could have contributed to and completed the dataset; however, busy schedules and perhaps a reluctance to share openly may have contributed to the decision not to be interviewed. The researcher originally intended to begin the phone interview by discussing the survey results; however, the researcher decided to forgo that question to give more time to the rest of the open-ended questions that more directly answered the research questions.

The Participant's Individual Experience

After first reminding the participants of their signed consent to participate in the interview, the researcher began by asking about the participants' personal and individual experiences. For example, participants were asked if they felt they had experienced individual success in this program and what factors contributed to that result. Of the 12 participants interviewed, 100% responded positively to the first question that they did feel they had experienced individual success in the program. Participant A said, "Yes. I've done well. I got all A's in every class. I believe I've been successful in that I've been able to get all this done and be successful in my courses while I'm working full-time and raising kids." Participant B said, "I don't think I would've been as successful or got as much out of the program if it wasn't for this cohort model." Others drew attention to the fact that 16 students started this program and the same 16 finished the coursework together, even though two people left the district for jobs in other districts.

While seven of the interviewees provided emphatically positive responses to this first question, two provided more qualified responses and three admitted to being leery or skeptical about the program and its blended cohort approach. The two that qualified their positive

responses were careful to define the term success for themselves. For example, Participant D said, "I think I've been successful in the coursework in terms of completing the coursework . . . I'm getting through the courses, and the reading, and the course modules – getting that stuff done in a timely manner." His comments drew attention to his reticence to define the experience as totally successful. That participant shared that he will not consider the program a success until he has finished his dissertation with a doctoral degree conferred on him by the institution. Participant L shared that she felt her success had been in the learning and that she felt very successful in most classes and sees true professional value; however, she pulled back her positive response when she discussed the statistics class. Regarding that class, she said, "I don't feel that I even learned it because . . . I couldn't remember how to do any of it." When the researcher followed up on that comment, she added, "Yes, in that class, definitely, I was less successful . . . content wise . . . even though I passed the class."

Three of the 12 participants who were interviewed, 25%, used the word "leery" to describe their perception of success. Participant B began the response by saying, "Success, I guess, is a relative term." She added, although she believes she had been successful and appreciated the blended cohort format, "At this point I do wonder if it was a little too accelerated for me now that I am in the dissertation part of it." In further discussion, this participant shared that she might have benefitted from more time in some courses, if not all of them. Participant E mentioned she had some worries at the beginning of the program because she did not feel as bonded to the cohort members at the beginning. Some members were already used to working closely together, but she did not share that same congeniality at first; however, she said that she "began to feel more successful the more classes that I went through and I was doing the work and finally came to the realization that . . . hey! . . . I can do this." Participant E expressed

hesitation at the question and said, “I was leery in the beginning, not necessarily of the blended, but how it was all going to be like and having the computer aspect of it.” She was particularly concerned that the blended format was merely another way to say independent study, and she knew that was not a good form of learning for her. Over time, she realized that the socially supportive aspects of the program eclipsed the independent and technological aspects of the program and she, too, felt that she had been successful.

Individual experience with the technological demands. Relating to the secondary question about technological demands within the blended doctoral cohort program, the researcher asked how prepared the individual students were for the technological demands of the program. She also asked where or how they may have struggled and how the technological aspects impacted their personal experiences. Similar to the responses to the first question, the interview data fell into three main categories: (1) 50% said they felt very prepared for the technological demands; (2) 25% said they felt adequately prepared; and (3) 25% said they were not as prepared as they thought they were or that they experienced difficulties that they did not anticipate. Within the group that felt very comfortable with the technology, two members were identified by the group as “techies” and/or district experts in the field of educational technology. One of those, Participant D, had used even more complex applications in another line of work. Another participant had previously been a professor at a different distance-learning institution and had prior experience with online and blended education from the faculty point-of-view. Participant G said, “I felt very prepared and quite comfortable with it.” He added that the district curriculum office had been “pushing new instructional technology and we are trying to lead people in that direction.” Finally, one of the cohort members whose job within the district was intricately connected with the use of technology responded that he did not struggle with the

technology. Participant F added, "This program does not rise and fall on technology. . . . What was most interesting was the person on the other side of the technology – not the technology used."

The other half of the respondents had varying levels of comfort with the technology, but all of them felt comfortable seeking out help when needed and that they had learned more about technology that could be applied to their professional lives. Participant E said that she was nervous about using applications such as Blackboard and Adobe Connect, and that she felt intimidated about the mandatory educational technology course; however, she followed up by saying, "I'm thrilled with it now. I still don't like videoconferencing because I don't like the silence that happens… that there's not enough feedback." When asked how she overcame those feelings or deficiencies, she said, "Mostly just practice. There's a bit of exploration on things. The experiences made me much more comfortable to explore and learn even more outside of what we had to do for school." Two participants commented they had some issues moving from Mac to PC controls, and one reported that she struggled with headsets for the videoconferencing requirement during synchronous classes. Finally, a couple students concurred that the need for greater technological proficiency arose because of the content of courses such as statistics, educational technology, and qualitative research.

Of the students who admitted that they had to improve their technological skills, 100% commented that they were thankful they could turn to their cohort members who were strong in that area. Participant I said, "They were powerful in helping me, all of us! I don't think we could have gotten as far as we have without those folks in the room." In addition, when asked if it was a burden to the group to have to support less tech-proficient students, the answer was always no; the group did not feel burdened when they needed to help or support their peers. Finally, the

entire group agreed that the technological aspect of the blended program brought with it a desired flexibility to the demanding curriculum (Gardner, 2000; Giannoukous et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2014; Korr et al., 2012; Sogunro, 2015). For example, Participant J commented, "It was nice to be able to have class from my home. It made it easier to accommodate because I have young children; so, I was able to attend class but at the same time be available for my children if needed." Participant G concurred with that statement and added, "Our local college also has a cohort for a doctorate, but it's all face-to-face class time… It was too much of a time demand… it's easy to get online, rather than drive 20 to 30 minutes to some office building."

Out of the respondents, ten mentioned that the technology piece of the program had a positive impact. While most focused on digital elements such as videoconferencing for the synchronous classes, or the flexibility of a blended format, Participant B mentioned how much she appreciated the online discussion boards. She said, "I think that piece of it, in terms of being able to communicate in a writing format, online… I think that it allowed us to get to know each other in a different setting than we were used to interacting." One person gave an ambivalent response because he was not challenged or overly impressed with the technology that was utilized or taught; instead, he saw the true value in the human aspects of the program. Participant D shared that he felt Adobe Connect as a platform used too much bandwidth. He said, "We had a lot of drops… and I think that's more to do with the design of the software and not the fault of anybody using the program. Most people don't have that bandwidth at their disposal." He did not feel as though that negatively impacted the experience; rather, as a person who has extensive expertise in the technical field, he recognized it as "the nature of that kind of situation" and something that will improve over time.

The participant who struggled with being seen and heard through the videoconferencing element shared high levels of frustration. Participant K said that at one point the struggle was so frustrating, "I ended up avoiding speaking. Mostly, to overcome it, I would type in my responses into a textbox." Even though she overcame the problem with support from a cohort member, she felt that the institution could have done more to help her avoid the negative experience. She suggested that students have an option to buy a laptop from the institution that would be pre-loaded with all the required software, microphones, and cameras. She also admitted that it could have been possible that her headset was broken and she did not realize it.

Individual experience with a social learning group. The next set of interview questions asked the participants to reflect on their experience within, and as a part, of their cohort, a social learning group. For example, they were asked if they believed the cohort had been successful in its social and collective approach to the coursework. They were also asked to describe the characteristics of the cohort that may have either contributed to the success of the group or added to any negative struggles. Without any hesitation, all 12 who were interviewed answered with an emphatic "yes" or "definitely," and many shared immediate examples without being prompted by the researcher.

Because this cohort practically formed itself from one common school district, relationships already existed and the group was quick to communicate with each other outside of designated class times. Participant J shared, "Especially in the beginning, when we felt a little more lost, we quickly began to form text chains." Participant D shared, "Even at work, through our work email, [we send] little notes that say, 'Hey! Keep up the good work!' or 'Keep working at it.'" Participant I, one of the main leaders of the group, shared some of the comments he has heard from people he knows in another more traditional doctoral program. He said, even though

they had a cohort, they had a hard time connecting with each other because they only knew one or two people. They shared with him that they felt his experience was probably more meaningful because of the cohort structure he was experiencing. He ended that section of the interview by saying, "That example really emphasizes and reiterates my belief that the cohort model is basically the strongest model that you can use so that you're supported emotionally and academically. You always have someone to bounce ideas off."

Five of those interviewed specifically mentioned the Washington DC trip as a memorable experience that deepened the relationships among the cohort. This trip was scheduled during the teachers' and administrators' summer vacation and the week was filled with tours, social dinners, conferences with leaders in education and public policy, and a trip to the Library of Congress where participants could receive their identification card for future research. When asked about an experience from the program that was unforgettable, Participant I shared, "I think that we were all close, but when we went to DC, and we were stuck in the heat, walking to different locations, talking with our professors, sitting down for dinner, being away from our day-to-day business… it was powerful." Participant G said, "It was the most fun. I learned from that trip, but the cohesiveness that came from that trip was really helpful for the cohort. It came at a good point in the program."

The Friday Study Session

In every interview, at some point during the open-ended questions, participants referenced their Friday afternoon study group and credited it as being a cornerstone of the group's success. Even though the students were regularly texting and emailing each other, they voluntarily met on Friday afternoons. Participant I said sometimes this study group served as a complaint session where they would be upset, and frustrated, and would say "four more weeks!

Four more weeks!" Sometimes, it was used to produce group projects, and sometimes it was simply a space and time for cohort members to sit down and write alongside someone else. The Friday study group was perhaps the most commonly cited example of the collective approach to the coursework. Participant B shared, "There was a certain time that was identified for anyone who wanted to come together to talk openly about areas that they may be struggling with or where they needed more information." Another added, "We could come and review activities that were needed for next week." Participant D put his strong feelings about the Friday study group in the following words.

> I don't know of many – or any – doctoral programs where students on their own decided they're going to hold extra class on Friday afternoons for an hour in the afternoon. I mean, most people are going home to be with their families and not three hours of extra work for no benefit other than to be together in their work.

The theme of *congeniality* was also revealed through this cohort-driven activity as Participant L said, "The times I went I had fun, I learned, and I was I glad I went."

Regarding the Friday study group, Participant J shared a different perspective. She said, "There were times when, depending on what the topic of the course was, I left more confused than when I got there. You would have everyone's interpretation on what something would be." She added that there were times that she would purposely skip the Friday study group because she had a handle on the topic and she did not want to get confused by alternate opinions or methods. She was quick to add, however, that, while the meeting was pivotal to the long-term success of the group, it was completely optional. She never felt pressured to attend and other participants also shared the same sentiment.

The voluntary nature of the Friday study group was one of the most outstanding manifestations of the group's social and collective approach to the coursework because it was not facilitated by the institution and it was freely organized and freely attended for the benefit of the individuals in the group; however, Participant K recognized that attending that meeting was not always feasible, even for the students who would have liked to have joined. He said, "We were kind of scattered around the city and a lot of times some of us couldn't make it because we were stuck in our school site or we had to get home to take care of business." He added that he wished they had used a videoconferencing tool like Adobe Connect for more than just the synchronous classes because the Friday sessions added to the cohesiveness of the cohort, but there were members who were left out at times.

Perceived Negative Experiences within a Social Learning Group

The researcher asked the participants to share other negative experiences, times when the cohort model may have been prohibitive to the success of the individual. While those who were interviewed were predominantly positive when speaking about their individual success within the cohort, there were some interesting perspectives that were revealed during this point in the interview. For example, a few people commented about peers who did not contribute equally to a project or assignment. Participant A said, "Sometimes there were people who were not pulling their own weight, but the group did not just give it to them… Nobody was willing to just give away [the answers]. We were pretty honest with each other." Participant I shared that, in those instances when someone was not doing his/her fair share of a group project, frustrations would tend to come out in less-than-positive ways. "There's going to be those things that come out, those little conversations behind people's backs. Things like, 'I can't believe I have to be in a

group with that person.'" While those conflicts did resolve and no one left the cohort because of interpersonal conflict, Participant I admitted that it was "the elephant in the room."

Another area that may be perceived as a negative impact stemmed from the close familiarity of the group. Some thought there was perhaps too much familiarity. Participant G shared, "Maybe it short-circuits some of the opportunities to grow. . . . The familiarity is a double-edged sword. It's helpful because it saved time and is efficient, but at the same time it might limit our opportunities." On the other hand, Participant E felt a bit excluded from that familiarity because she was the only person who was not an administrator at a school site or with the district. She shared two complications that arose from that situation. First, it seemed that the discussions and presentations were overly-focused around the perspective of an administrator instead of a teacher. She said she had to point out that she was not privy to all the same data and information that they were. In addition, she felt that the information being presented was helpful to them, but did not really apply to her. Second, in the beginning she felt discounted or undervalued a bit because she was not in those administrative meetings and did not have those prior experiences with the majority of the cohort. When asked how she worked through that she said that she openly shared her concerns and continued to present her perspectives on the topics. Ultimately, she felt a resolution to the frustration and shared, "They realized that this was not an *us versus them* kind of thing. I knew what I was doing."

The Cohort's Social, Collective Approach to Coursework

The unanimous agreement that the group was successful as it socially and collectively worked its way through the coursework was often attributed to the personal relationships that grew beyond their professional interactions. For example, Participant D said, "We knew each other prior to this program, but we did not know each other on personal levels. What we

discovered was that we developed stronger friendships." Some other positive comments included, "Everybody was there for each other." Participant H said, "There are 16 of us, and so it's like having 15 cheerleaders all for you at one time." "I wouldn't have done my doctorate if I would have had to go through it by myself." Although the participants openly shared some of the conflicts, challenges, and negative situations that impacted the group or the individual, there was overwhelming consensus that the group was a source of support and motivation.

The words "accountability" and "checking in" were used in many interviews because the cohort members felt not only supported by each other but also driven by each other (Tisdell et al., 2004; Wisker et al., 2007). Participant A said, "In the beginning . . . we did really rely on each other a lot more. But it was also accountability. I mean, we would check in on each other and say 'Hey! Where are you in the process or the paper?'" A slightly different perspective was revealed by Participant K who said, "We did not face a negative accountability to each other. You know, we did not say, 'Come on and get it done.' We were self-motivated and supportive at the same time." Participant F shared that he had never seen himself as a "cohort type of person." He felt that he was more independently driven. He added, "Because we have been in it together, because we have been struggling and succeeding together… it's kind of like the military… no one is left behind." Reflecting at the end of the coursework, as the dissertation phase was ramping up, he finished this point by saying, "I'm the first in our cohort to be at this stage where I am. So now I want to help them out. I need to help people get through this. No one can *not* make it."

The participant's perceptions about the cohort's experiences with technology. The researcher again asked the participants to view those group dynamics through the lens of the technological aspects of the program. At the start of the program, students met with a technology

expert from the institution and students verified that they could fulfill the basic requirements for the synchronous and asynchronous aspects of the program. Participant K applauded that opportunity and stated, "The first day was really helpful, but I think the most important thing we had to do was get us to go onto Adobe Connect and actually try it out. That helped a lot of people."

When thinking about the proficiency of the group, responses included the following. "I would say about 80%. I feel like there wasn't a lot of issues with tech." Participant G said, "As a whole, moderately prepared…. There were a lot of people in the middle." Another said, "In general, I would say average." Participant B concurred and stated, "I think the requirements of the course – if I were to say on a scale of 1 to 10 – I would say six or seven. Some are really high and some are not so high." Within the cohort group, one member oversaw the educational technology for the district; likewise, "Some of us could turn on the computer and email . . . but that was about it." On the other end of the spectrum, Participant I said, "Three of us were probably at a 7 or 8. The rest of us would probably end up at 2 or 3;" however, he also added that the cohort members supported each other by communicating often via texting, email, and the Friday study session. All of those interviewed shared the same opinion that the cohort, as a group, helped each other through any struggle; additionally, they felt fortunate to be peers with district leaders in educational technology.

Regarding technological issues that may or may not have resulted from student inexperience or error, the researcher asked how the cohort group responded to challenges in the technological delivery of instruction. Participant F said, "It seemed so seamless . . . or easy. I'm sure that there were times when a connection dropped, or something. But we just texted each other and fixed it." This statement reflected the pre and post-test survey data that was revealed;

while some were concerned with technological glitches in the beginning of the program, zero participants commented on any drawbacks of the blended cohort program. On a follow-up question about how the cohort dealt with those who were "not so high" in technological proficiency, Participant B responded, "If I were the person needing the assistance, I would seek out assistance. If it were somebody else that needed help, I would reach out to them." This data was also reflected in the pre and post-test survey statistics that revealed 69% of the cohort members felt willing and/or obligated to help those in need; in addition, up to 25% of the cohort cited an attitude of empathy for those who were having struggles.

One person shared that the university helped to mitigate any technological struggles by placing people who had technological strengths in groups with people who needed more support. An added benefit of this policy was that cliques were discouraged and cohort members had a chance to work with people that they may not have had a chance to work with before. Participant K added, "If I had some sort of tech issue, I turned to a couple people in the cohort that I knew were techie. I did not really go through the university for technological issues." According to the interviewees, most participants did not take their technological issues to the institution; instead, they handled it together, as a group.

Regarding technological frustrations, Participant C added an additional layer of perception by stating, "At times, the technology troubles were coming from professors. Not just from us. But I would say, the group overall was prepared, but it would be frustrating at times when we couldn't lend a hand." Participant G correlated that sentiment when he said, "There were instances when there was difficulty on their end and I don't know if it was because of lack of familiarity or just technical difficulties." Regardless of whether the technology issues were due to the participants or the faculty/institution, those interviewed did not view technological

glitches as much more than nuisances. In general, participants reflected that they felt frustration when the technological issues interfered with the learning experience.

The Participant's Perception of the Institution's Role

The first two parts of the research question examined the indicators for success for the individual and then the individual as a part of a collective group, a cohort. The third indicator for success focused on the institution's role in the individual's and the cohort's perceived experiences. For example, the researcher asked for examples of how the institution supported the individual's and the cohort's success. Most of the responses were quite positive and included remarks such as the following. Participant G said, "They've been good about walking me through the process… the right path." Participant J agreed and said, "I think that the individual instructors were incredibly supportive." Participant H said, "The instructors did a really good job at making it not too overwhelming." Several cohort members shared how impressed they were about the quick response time when they sent emails to professors or the institution office. Participant B echoed that feeling when she shared, "The institution has supported my success by reaching out, supporting me, and making sure there's the understanding that I needed. Or, they provided me with an avenue to get me to the place I needed to be."

Participant C mentioned taking advantage of the institution's writing center. Early in the program, she lacked confidence in her skill as a scholarly writer and researcher because it had been several years since she had been a student. Some of her cohort colleagues also used the writing center and recommended that she try it. She was thankful for the academic support from the university and said, "After a while I got my own feel for my own writing and I re-learned the mechanics like APA style, and so on." Participant E concurred with that sentiment saying,

"Mechanics get a little rusty overtime." She also appreciated that the institution supported her writing by providing a writing center.

Two negative responses tended to center around issues such as payment of tuition or clarification of directions on how to register for a class or session. Participant L shared her difficulties with the financial aspects of the program and shared the following information.

> It was about communication. There was an error in the price of units, so then that resulted in me owing money. Then, there was a lack of communication between the financial aid office and the bursar's office, and the bursar's office *only* communicated via email, not over the phone.

That particular stressful situation made the participant want to drop out of the program, but she added, "The reason why I'm still in is because of the professors. They are amazing!" The survey data reflected the growing sense of appreciation of faculty when more students listed professors as a source of support on the post-test.

A few participants commented about a professor that the cohort took issue with; however, not one mentioned a specific name of the professor but instead they focused on what caused the conflict and how they handled it. Participant I said, "The reality is, some professors taught differently – different philosophies. One professor in particular had their own beliefs and they were very difficult." Another participant shared, "Some professors, I think, had a problem understanding between a doctoral program and a bachelor's program. They just did not get it." In handling conflict, Participant I shared that after they had discussed the problem as a cohort, "One of us would communicate with [the director] and, if it was something really serious, we had an open door to meet with [the director]." Some interviewees also shared that the group

decided to laugh off their conflicts with professors with inside jokes that they still use even after their coursework was over.

Although there were some complications along the way, the cohort members remained very positive when asked about how the institution and the faculty supported their individual success. A few remarked about how one favorite professor, someone that was personally familiar with many in the district, started the coursework off by teaching the first two classes. They thought that choice demonstrated wisdom on behalf of the university because it connected the group in a more personal way to the university and led to a very "smooth transition." One person enthusiastically shared, "I did not feel detached from my professors… I did feel that I could go to them. So, to me, that was a tremendous strength. I really love that." Participant K agreed and said, "That was a big deal for me – that connection from the university as far as the success I feel I've had. For me, it was one of the biggest supporting mechanisms from the university. That relationship with the professors and the quick feedback." Although professors were a plane flight away from the cohort, students did not feel detached or forgotten.

How the institution fostered the cohort relationships. When asked for examples of how the institution fostered the congenial relationships of the cohort, most participants first drew back to the fact that the cohort came together as a group with a common goal of doctoral study before they contracted with the university; therefore, the supportive structure was already in play, embedded in the group without the institution's help. Still, participants appreciated the face-to-face classes and the occasional social events that the institution sponsored. Participant A said, "In general, the way that the model is set up… we just really clicked well with that model." She later added, "Our cohort already knew each other, but with the support from the institution, we really felt that they had a genuine interest in getting to know us and supporting us."

Participant K reflected that the "get-to-know-you" activities at the start of a new class were "something more for them, meaning the professors." While the students may have felt that those activities were futile for the close group, he thought, "I had a little voice in my head saying, 'You guys know each other but the professors don't know you.'" Professors would deviate from the planned ice-breaker activities and ask more personal and relevant questions. For example, instructors started to say, "Tell me about your dissertation topic," or "Tell me where you see yourself professionally after this program."

After a few classes, it became clear to the cohort that professors were talking about their "unique" cohort and discussing the fascinating structure that was reflected in the close relationships, the willingness to help each other, and the general sense of camaraderie. One faculty member sent an email to the cohort asking the cohort members to direct questions to the instructor, not just to the cohort members and leaders. Regarding that email, Participant C said, "They definitely realized how tight the cohort was, and they were trying to support without squashing." When asked if they thought there were some professors who felt like outsiders, Participant C added, "Some were great… and they sort of immersed themselves into it. And there were some that, I think, were taken aback by it. Those [professors] just never quite understood how our group works." Participant E even threw some of the blame for a strained relationship on the cohort itself and said sometimes the cohort could be a little difficult. "Most of us are *type-A* personalities, overachievers, and we want to know exactly what we're supposed to do. Sometimes the instructors did not communicate that way . . . but they were willing to help." Although there were a few professors that did not mesh well with the culture of the group, most members agreed with Participant L who said, "I felt that they treated us respectfully. They laughed with us. I felt that it was positive."

The participant's perception of institutional expectations. When asked if students' expectations of the program were met, all who were interviewed agreed that they were; however, not every participant had the same expectations. Fifty percent of the interviewees cited their expectation of having challenging coursework and guidance through a dissertation, but one added that she thought it would be harder or more overwhelming than it was. Of the respondents, 25% shared that they did not have any defined expectations other than guidance through the program. Additionally, 19% added that there were some struggles along the way, but that those did not damage the overall sense of satisfaction. Some of those struggles referred to assignments that were not quite clear, or a change in the overall structure of the program that required some adjustment.

On the other hand, Participant K shared very clear expectations that he listened for during the introductory presentation of the program. At that time, the cohort was already forming and 7-8 committed people interviewed several universities before choosing to contract with one institution. He said he heard three details that defined his expectations: (1) the university would prioritize that the cohort would stay together and not be merged into another cohort; (2) the university was excited to integrate activities that went beyond the classroom like a trip to China and a trip to Washington DC; and (3) the university would guide them all the way through the dissertation phase and that both phases, the coursework and the dissertation, could be completed in three years. He added, "If it goes four years it's only because of a personal issue, not because of the way the program was laid out, and that's what we wanted."

Questions about the Learning Theories

After asking participants about their views on the program and the blended cohort experience, the researcher informed them about the three main learning theories that were the

foundation of the literature review: Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), the community of inquiry framework (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008), and Transformational Theory (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). Then, the participants were asked to comment on how these theories and frameworks imbued their experience as the member of a blended doctoral cohort. All the participants who agreed to be interviewed shared similar thoughts and feelings about the emphatic representation of Social Learning Theory within their cohort. Their ideas about the community of inquiry were more varied possibly because they were less familiar with that theory. Some common quotes included the following statements: "I'm not familiar with that;" "That sounds familiar;" and "Could you explain that to me?" Finally, individuals shared differing feelings about where they fell in the transformation from practitioner to researcher; however, that self-assessment aligns with Transformational Theory in that different people will realize their transformation in different ways and at different moments along the journey.

Perceptions of Social Learning Theory. How important was Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) to this cohort? All of those who agreed to be interviewed cited the strength of the cohort as a social group of support at least once during the interview. Participant A shared how the cohort structure added to the learning and said, "I think it's very important. You learn a lot more when you're not just getting your information from a book or even from a teacher that you don't know… that you may or may not relate to." Participant D suggested that the cohort social structure harnessed the collective capacity of the group when he said, "Whenever you're learning in the collective, the more minds contributing to the thought process the better the understanding will be. Someone might think of something in a slightly different way; another person in another way, and so on." Participant L had prior experience with Social Learning Theory in her undergraduate and master's programs. She shared, "For me, personally, I learn

more when I work with other people . . . When we brainstorm ideas, we get more ideas and it's even better than if I just did it myself. So, I fell that learning together is the best way of learning."

Participant F equated Social Learning Theory with the positive peer pressure that drove the group to a 100% completion rate in the coursework phase of the program. He said, "This is a conversation that we have had as a group. . . . Peer pressure . . . Knowledge that you are in this group – expected to contribute – and failure is not really an option." Participant D echoed that perspective when he shared that his cohort was sending a "pretty loud statement to the city. We really set a high bar, and we feel as though we recognize that." Even after two cohort members left the school district for positions in other districts, all 16 members stayed together. Participant F believed it was because the two who moved to other districts still felt supported in the social group. The phrases *peer pressure* and *competition* became substantial themes that are discussed at the end of this chapter.

Participant B, who was not acutely aware of the Bandura's theory, called the phenomena "groupthink." She shared that the diversity of thought and opinion was a definite strength of the cohort. When asked if she thought she would have been as successful in a doctoral program that did not include the cohort model and this specific cohort, she said, "I think that it would have been more difficult… I do think that not having that *groupthink* – that support from really all the cohort members in one way or another… I think I'm more successful in the group, yes." Similarly, Participant E believed that she would not be as successful if she were not in a cohort and said, "It was one of those things where I would have eventually gotten things done, but I think the motivation to work with everybody and to be on top – there is a little bit of that competition –has been better."

Participant H quickly differentiated between the blended cohort and a completely online program. She said, "I wouldn't have gotten as much out of it as I did within the social context because when you learn with others you collaborate, have conversations, interact with people. It's almost like building an alliance." Some interviewees shared that a couple of cohort members seemed to not want to be a part of that alliance. This finding was consistent with other literature in which the cohort model's "intensive interpersonal environment" was viewed as a positive factor (Sathe, 2009, p. 46); however, data has revealed that some participants find it a weakness, preferring instead to work more independently. Participant I said, "We had one or two outliers who really wanted to do it on their own." In his opinion, however, those members struggled more throughout the process, though they received the same support because of the social nature of the group. The perceived benefits of the cohort's social structure were revealed in survey data and again by Participant J who said, "I think that if I did not have my colleagues there, I would have quit."

Perceptions of the Community of Inquiry Framework. Because the Community of Inquiry framework (Akyol & Garrison, 2008; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008) is relatively new compared to Social Learning theory, when the researcher asked about the framework, first she needed to briefly explain the premise. The researcher shared that the framework applies Social Learning Theory to learning groups in 21st century models because it does not necessarily require that students be physically present in the same space and time. For example, there could still be a community of inquiry where there is learning even if there are large distances between students and teachers; however, as examined in Chapter 2, Garrison and Vaughan's (2008) framework requires three components for a successful learning community: (1) teaching

presence; (2) social presence; and (3) cognitive presence. The three elements are like three vital ingredients for a recipe, or the three circles that intersect in a Venn diagram.

After a brief explanation and discussion about the framework, the researcher asked for participants to share their perceptions about whether they felt their cohort had created a Community of Inquiry, how the three components contributed to the success of the individual and the success of the group, and, reflecting on their experience, when they felt each component within their learning experiences. All participants agreed that their cohort had created a Community of Inquiry and that all three components were present within the cohort's experience during their coursework; however, they did not all agree that the ingredients manifested in the same percentages, the same examples, or the same modes of instruction and learning. Participant F shared, "All three of those things were present, but maybe not all in the way that an institution might expect." He was referring to the point that in many cases the doctoral students were doing the teaching for other students.

Teaching presence. Within their blended cohort experience, the participants engaged in both synchronous and asynchronous learning. While the asynchronous learning involved instructional modules and discussion board posts that could be completed individually at a variety of times and place, the official synchronous learning happened in two ways: (1) face-to-face on a Saturday; or (2) online with faculty and students logging in to a videoconference at the same time, but from different places. Participant I quickly referenced experiencing the teaching presence during face-to-face class sessions; he also extoled the online classes and said, "Depending on the professor, what we did on Adobe Connect was very powerful at times… To be honest, just because we were talking on a computer screen did not mean that we were not face-to-face." Participant K said, "So, for teaching presence, we had either a professor or

someone in our cohort who was leading the teaching. With content, we were learning something." Along the same line of thinking, Participant C said, "We had opportunities to demonstrate our own teaching abilities when we would give presentations."

Connecting the teaching presence with the social presence, Participant B said, "Obviously, you've got the teaching that occurs in the synchronous process. When I think of that piece itself, there is obviously teaching, but there was social as well." Participant F said, "We were the teachers," and he shared that, in many cases, he felt that *he* was doing the teaching, particularly during a Friday study session when the cohort members would "discuss and engage in the material before we even had a class – helping each other get a better grasp on it." When asked when she felt the strongest teaching presence, Participant A reluctantly said, "Honestly? Our Friday meetings. We would hear what the teacher had to say, but then we felt more comfortable dissecting it as a group." Similar responses corroborated the idea that, as a group, they often felt more comfortable teaching each other and teaching themselves. When the researcher asked if professors brought additional teaching components to the Friday meetings, the responses were positive and Participant A shared, "Then the learning was boosted even more because there was low structure and low expectations." Participant K added, "We turned to each other to teach each other."

Some negative perceptions were shared regarding the synchronous sessions, when student and faculty were on the computer together. Some students shared that they were the most boring, least engaging examples of teaching presence. Multiple interviewees cited a complication that the videoconferencing application required a large amount of bandwidth and students were instructed to freeze their video feed while listening to the professor's lecture of another student's answer or presentation. Participant L responded, "Sometimes I just felt so

checked out. I wasn't even really paying attention because I did not feel engaged. It's harder to be engaged in that videoconferencing." Referencing the same digital disconnect from their peers and the instructor when freezing the video, Participant L shared, "I don't know… if we did not do that, maybe it would've been more effective? If we did not freeze them, then maybe it wouldn't be so flat and dry? I don't know."

Social presence. As revealed through previous questions about the collective approach of this cohort and their understanding of Social Learning Theory as embedded in the cohort model, social presence was considered the most dominant and recognizable component of the Community of Inquiry; however, as was revealed during questions about teaching presence, different interviewees cited different manifestations of the social component. To begin, some participants clarified that "social was largely in place before," "social was the biggest," and "we definitely had the social aspect down." Participant L said, "I think the social pull was pretty strong. I like the people in my cohort and therefore I wanted to participate in the things that we were going to do."

While most cited the already established personal and professional relationships, some participants mentioned they felt social presence in more unexpected exercises. For example, Participant C said, "I felt social presence when we were doing discussion boards and we were building off what another person wrote. Their ideas." Others reflected that it was the times when they were in a room together, either the Saturday face-to-face classes or the Friday study sessions, when they felt the most social presence.

During synchronous sessions when students were online with each other and a professor, the social presence kept cohort members engaged with each other, even if they were not engaged with the professor. Over half of those interviewed shared examples of texting or back-

channeling during those periods of instruction as students clarified instructions and directions, planned for their Friday study session agenda, and irreverently poked fun at each other and the professor. Responding to a question about when she felt the strong social presence, Participant A said, "Comically, the strongest social element was probably the online class time because everyone was texting each other outside of the actual online class environment. Sometimes it got really funny." Similarly, when asked if there was even a social presence when the screens were frozen, Participant E responded with the following statement.

> Yes. And a lot of time there was a conversation back and forth through texting or whatever. Conversations between members of the group were actually online at the same time… so, the social component was there but it wasn't the same cognitive presence as if you had a face-to-face classroom.

This perspective reflected not only the theme of congeniality among the group, but also the theme of relevance the profession (Giannoukous et al., 2015; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Knowles, 1979; McGrath, 2009; Pappas, 2013; Sogunro, 2015). The participants leveraged the strength of their social structure wherever and whenever appropriate; however, that impulse may have come at the expense of a professor's lecture that the participants found less than relevant or less than engaging. The act of freezing the screen, although it may have been done to manage bandwidth, may have compromised an opportunity for cognitive presence.

Cognitive presence. While students largely blurred the lines between teaching and social presences, cognitive presence revealed responses that included words like "internalize," "independent," "participation," and "presentation." In this component of the framework, students commented on the activities that demonstrated their learning and provided feedback for growth. For example, Participant C shared, "The cognitive presence was felt when we were

partnered and needed to give feedback on each other's work like a survey. Being able to give feedback to my colleague about my understanding." Participant K qualified his response by saying, "It really depended on the course. . . . It really depended on the content and how comfortable I was with the content." Specifically, he was sharing that his learning, his cognitive presence, was sometimes strongest in the face-to-face class and sometimes strongest on the discussion board.

After sharing how the social presence would sometimes eclipse the teaching presence, particularly during an online synchronous session, the researcher asked Participant E the following question: If you did not feel cognitive presence during the videoconferencing, when did it happen? She echoed what some of her cohort colleagues had also said; it differed depending on what the topic was, who was teaching, and the type of instruction that was being given. "Definitely during the face-to-face class because there was such an accountability piece. I'm looking at you and I know what you're doing . . . so, you focus a little more?"

Three of the 12 interviewees cited a common phrase, "Value add," and they referred to that concept when discussing cognitive presence. Participant H spoke of it in the following way.

> It was like someone started at a lower-level; the next person ramped it up . . . and again the next person ramped it up. That's what caused the instructor to value add, too. Every time we pulled, it was going to a higher cognitive level or at a deeper cognitive level.

Participant C cited the discussion board was a place where students had to "internalize what someone else was saying and then add value to it." When Participant H was asked about where she experienced "value add" the most, she said, "The inquiry piece would be face-to-face, and secondly the synchronous part. It's so much different when you are able to have that body language . . . that energy." The "value add" concept revealed a common theme from the survey

data that the cohort members believed strongly in the collective capacity of the group. It also connected to another theme of friendly competition and positive peer pressure that emerged from the interviews (Gardner, 2008; Maher, 2005, Ward, 2014; Wisker et al, 2007).

Participant K may have summed up the challenge of creating a Community of Inquiry by saying, "For me, that's the challenge of blended learning." Along with others, he agreed that the three components were recognizably evident within their coursework, but they were not as stereotypical or predictable as one might think. Because the social presence was such a powerful component of this cohort, it influenced how teaching presence and cognitive presence were felt. Participant J said, "Sometimes [social] was a more important presence, but I would say they were all there. But the social portion had us all coming back to talk to one another or engaging with one another." Participant G said, "I would say half the time the teaching presence came from the professor, and half the time the teaching presence came from each other;" however, that cohort member did not see that as a negative attribute. As the survey data revealed, this group saw themselves as life-learners who were pushing each other to pursue a higher degree in education for themselves, for their district, and for their students.

Perceptions of Transformational Theory. While the literature surrounding Bandura's (1977) and Garrison and Vaughan's (2008) ideas related closely with the cohort model as a flexible social learning structure, particularly in the digital age, transformational theory (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009) informed the research questions because the focus of the study was the participants' perceptions of their success as individuals and as a cohort. Transformational Theory is a Constructivist Theory that focuses on adult learning through task-oriented problem solving and reflection of the learning process. Imbued in the survey data and the interviews, participants readily reported on their perceptions of their adult learning experiences throughout

the doctoral coursework. They also identified the benefits of the social and collective approach via the cohort model. Finally, they valued the professional and personal flexibility that came with the blended delivery of that coursework (Gardner, 2000; Giannoukous et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2014; Korr et al., 2012; Sogunro, 2015). The questions about transformational theory demanded a more reflective response as participants looked back on their two years of learning to decide whether they had transformed from practitioners to researchers, an institutional outcome for a doctoral student.

How did the participants respond when asked if they believed they had transformed from a practitioner to a researcher? First, all 12 interviewees cited the academic and personal transformations were heavily supported by the supportive structure of the cohort. Specifically, participants credited the solidarity of the cohort members and proudly acknowledged the fact that 16 members started with the first class and the same 16 members finished the last class. Seven of the interviewees believed they had transformed into researchers. Three of those interviewed believed they were either "still on the road" but had, as Participant H stated, "a better understanding of the researcher's role." Participant L replied that he did not believe she had made that transformation, but she added, "I actually felt that I was doing more research in my bachelor's degree than I am doing in this program . . . Maybe it's because these classes are so short, so I don't feel that way. Maybe it's because I don't like research." Participant K did not accept the notion that he was transforming from a practitioner to a researcher because, as he said, "Where I see myself professionally, I don't see myself ever *not* being a practitioner or ever *not* being a researcher."

Of the 58% who believed they had transformed, most cited their abilities to access empirical research, digest data, and synthesize multiple resources when analyzing an issue.

Some examples of their perceptions include the following statements. Participant E said, "This program has gotten me back into researching and I've been able to find what's relevant and what's actually good research . . . what's useful." Participant I said, "Not only was the writing better, but the communication, the dialogue, the regular levels of conversation, started shifting into more of a true professional vocabulary, you know? Our discussions were a little more thoughtful." Participant F said, "I now have the ability to really go see what the research is in an application. To really get into the heart of a lot of issues that I've only read about in books."

Participant I partially credited the vision of the university's director for his transformation. While he recognized that changes took place over the many courses, through multiple assignments, projects, and modules, he also said the director "communicated to everybody this was the vision; this was the sequence of events; this as where students are, and this was where they should be after three months, six months, etc." Participant C reflected on the institution's role as supporter through the transformation and she said, "They prepared us for this along the way. They've given us what we needed at the time." Overall, participants agreed that, as individuals and as a cohort, they were slowly but surely getting where the program's administrators wanted them to be; however, as Participant I said, "We were not there overnight."

The 25% who reported they were still in the transformational process agreed that they had a "better understanding of the researcher's role," but that they need to continue through the dissertation phase to truly experience the shift. Participant A struggled with seeing herself as a researcher because she was still actively "learning and gathering information about [her] topic;" however, she also said that she has become "more interested . . . more purposeful . . . and more savvy in her digging for information and being specific about the research that she has brought to

the table." Similarly, Participant L did "feel like an expert," and, therefore she did not feel that she had made a "big transformation."

Participant L did not believe she had transformed through the doctoral program and she shared two interesting points of view. First, she was emphatic about her positive feelings about the cohort members and said, "I feel supported 100%. I feel like they got me through it;" however, she also added that she did not feel that she really learned the material as deeply as she would have liked. She added that she entered the program at the encouragement of the cohort members and because "it was one of my goals in my five-year plan after I finished my master's degree." Unfortunately, professional and personal stressors impacted her doctoral journey and, while she got through the courses with the support of her cohort, she felt that the fast-pace of the 8-week courses resulted in a lack of flexibility. She said, "I just don't feel that there's a lot of flexibility in the program, and, for me, timing-wise, it would've been better to have been able to take a break." She repeated, "You have to finish, you have to finish, you have to finish," and, ultimately, she believed that a slower, more traditional university approach would have been better for her.

While some participants were a bit reluctant to admit a transformation, or label themselves as researchers, a few revealed a definite sense of pride in their developed skills and the purpose behind their research. Participant K said, "I don't want to call it a transformation;" he also commented, "I think my research skills have transformed to being more of a practitioner because as I research I'm wondering how to apply, either to my school or to the district." He added that he felt his research had transitioned from being theory-based to practical application. Participant B shared a moment of epiphany that occurred after she participated in a district professional development program. She remembered how the premise of the webinar was

supported by anecdotal evidence, but lacked empirical data. She said, "I kept saying, 'Why? Where did you get this? Where is the research that gives you the basis for this?' That, for me, was a moment where I realized I started questioning what I hear and what I read."

Participant Reflections: "What Ifs" and Words of Wisdom

The final set of questions gave participants an opportunity to reflect on the positive and negative experiences with the blended doctoral cohort. They also allowed participants to share their words of wisdom for future students, cohorts, and institutions that would embark on similar journeys and programs.

The researcher asked participants to ponder how their experience might have been different if they had chosen a more traditional doctoral program or traditional classroom delivery model. Participant C commented, "I think in a traditional setting you rely on yourself and your family and the instructors. We relied on each other for that support. This program is built to build. To build support for each other." Participant J shared what she had heard from some colleagues who were in a traditional doctoral program where students meet once a week, every week. She said, "They were all envious. Many of them said that they should've done our program instead. There's something new about the blended program – everyone was a little unsure - so, it was *safer* to do the more traditional program."

Participants were also asked, if they were to pursue another degree in higher education, would they seek a program with a blended cohort model? While many who were interviewed agreed they would seek another blended cohort, the reasons why varied. For example, Participant K believed that if he had been in a more traditional program, he would be going at a "snail's pace." He said, "Almost 90% of the principals I talked to got their doctorate before they

became principals. I work every day of the year – it's a daunting job. Having this kind of blended set up helped me choose this program."

As revealed earlier in the analysis of the interviews, Participant L was very open with her dissatisfaction with certain elements of the program including the lack of flexibility to pause or retake a class and the fast pace of the 8-week classes. She, again, shared that she would have preferred a program that included 15-week courses that she could register for at her own pace. She said, "I had never been in a blended program before, but I went with this program because it was a team decision to enroll in this program." Although she successfully completed the 2-year coursework, she felt that "this program turned me from learning because I couldn't master the content. . . . I haven't learned at the level I want to learn, especially statistics."

Words of advice to an individual. When asked to share their advice to an individual who is about to begin the doctoral journey in a blended cohort, participants shared these thoughts. Participant L said, "Maybe, the only advice I can offer is that they really need to understand that this is fast track. I mean, we were told over and over that we needed to invest this many hours. Maybe it just never clicked in." Participant G cautioned a new doctoral student, "If you're not tech savvy, you should quickly become more adept by talking to other people. If you're not tech savvy, it would be a hindrance."

Five of the participants, 42% of those interviewed, advised future students to be "open-minded" to the process and committed to starting and completing. Phrases that expressed that opinion included the following. Participant B said, "Have that mindset going in." Participant I said, "There will never be a good time to do a doctorate. You just have to dive in and do it." Participant F said, "If you're going to put the effort and finances into this, make sure that it can be something that is a benefit; that it is not just something you're doing for your degree purposes.

Be serious about it." Regarding that need for investing the hard work and making the sacrifice, Participant J commented, "Nobody can do your homework for you. . . . This journey is long and it's a lot of work and sacrifice." The same participant later echoed that sentiment and said, "It's not always the smartest person to get the doctorate; it's the person with the most perseverance."

Seven of the participants, 58% of those interviewed, mentioned taking advantage of the supportive cohort structure to bolster individual success. Phrases such as "don't do it alone," "lean on your cohort," and, "take advantage of the diverse group of people who are with you," reflected the themes found in the literature, the survey data, and the interview data. These beliefs, imbued with trust in fellow cohort members and commitment to the process and the outcomes, can flourish long after the coursework and even the dissertations have been completed (Witte & James, 1998). Not only did participants mention that cohort peers could be counted on a source of personal and emotional support, they also believed strongly that the diverse expertise of their cohort was a strong benefit (Unzueta et al., 2008). For example, Participant E recommended, "As a participant, find people who have different areas of expertise than your own."

Words of advice to a cohort. Similarly, the researcher asked the participants to reflect on advice they would share with a cohort, a group, about to begin on a doctoral program. All who were interviewed shared the advice to "get to know each other on a personal level," "help each other," and "rely on each other." Within that idea, one person cautioned against being competitive against each other and Participant E said, "Be each other's cheerleaders and each other's impetus to keep going." Participant I restated the benefits of the Friday study session and said, "A lot of this would not come to this if we did not have that study group." A few repeated the idea that a new cohort should find and exploit the skill sets of the individuals to build the

capacity of the group. Finally, two of those interviewed added to the idea of openness by encouraging a new cohort to "be honest with one another," and "trust one another." Participant G said, "Be open to listening to others – trusting that they will value your time and you value their time. That's a hard thing."

Words of advice to an institution. Finally, participants were asked to think of advice they would give to an institution that was either looking to start a blended doctoral cohort program, or was looking to improve an existing program. Of those interviewed, 58% mentioned ideas that focused around Adult Learning Theory, including being sensitive to the adult professionals that are in the program and their busy schedules. Specifically, Participant H cautioned the institution and the faculty to "keep in mind that there are certain times of the year when the work schedule is really impacted. It can be really difficult to write a 20-page paper when you're getting ready to have graduation." In addition, Participant G mentioned the need for true breaks in the timeline; he said that the identified *breaks* or *holidays* were absorbed by the need to catch up on dissertation work; however, when asked if he would have been willing to extend the length of the program to accommodate breaks, he said, "I think I would have preferred to have a few courses that overlapped – double duty – not make it longer." Others felt that the institution needed to be "fluid" in their approach to a cohort, resulting in the ability and desire to adjust to meet the needs of the group, when appropriate.

Within that 50%, some also commented that it is important for professors to view and interact with the cohort members with a higher level of respect than they would for an undergraduate student. For example, Participant E said, "There's a huge difference between adult learners who also have other things going on and someone whose only job or priority is to

go to school." Participant C added, "Some of the challenges have been when it was apparent that the professor did not understand how the cohort model actually worked."

Keeping papers and projects relevant to the realities of the cohort's district and the participants' dissertation goals was also cited as an area of growth for an institution to examine. Professors who were also practitioners within primary and secondary education, and who related their lectures and assessments to authentic tasks were more respected (Dondlinger & Jones, 2008; Drago-Severson et al., 2005; Engstrom et al., 2008; Harris & Marx, 2009; Knowles, 1984; Zheng, 2010). On the other hand, professors who did not appear to understand the cohort members' experiences or approaches were less influential, and, at some time, offensive to participants (McGrath, 2009). Participant I said, "We had another professor that had not worked in education [below the college level]. That professor gave us so much busywork that I felt like a freshman in college again. The work was not in any way, shape, or form geared towards a professional."

Other pieces of advice for the institution fell into two categories. First, two of the interviewees shared the view that "geography matters" and that institutions should form cohorts with consideration to proximity. Participant H shared, "I think it's been important to not just attend class together but to have a relationship with the members of the group where you are. We've become a little community, a little family." Participant J shared, "For programs that are just online, . . . there were still discussion questions but they did not really form a connection with anyone." In addition to proximity, Participant B and Participant H discussed the concept of curriculum mapping or "flushing out the curriculum" so that it is seamless when students move from the coursework to the dissertation phase of the program. One idea was to look at the 10-course curriculum and reorder the courses to make sure that the curriculum was building on

students' strengths and skills. Participant H said, "I feel that some of the classes that were in the beginning could've been more to the end, and some of the more difficult classes that were at the end could have been more towards the beginning . . . when you are really motivated."

Themes Revealed through the Interviews

Congeniality of the group. All the interviewees shared how much they genuinely liked the people in their cohort and that the relationships between the people were primary factors in the success of the individual and the success of the group. Participant K said, "There was a comfort zone and a reliability that we had known each other. We knew we could turn to each other and work with each other." Participant F said, "I would not have even done this program if it hadn't been for this cohort. I'm so busy, but the fact that we have this cohort made it work." A few shared that they genuinely liked the people in their cohort and that they made having fun a priority. The Washington DC trip was mentioned in multiple interviews as a pivotal moment when the cohort stepped away from their positions within the district. Participant J elaborated, "It allowed us to get to know one another and experience something new all at the same time. It really added a lot." While fighting off the isolation typically experienced by doctoral students (Gardner, 2008; Jones et al., 2014; Wisker et al., 2007), the social relationships of the participants greatly added to the persistence through the program, the enjoyment of the process, and the sense of belonging (Bandura, 1977; Blackley & Sheffield, 2015; Drago-Severson et al., 2001; Halloway & Alexandre, 2012; Maher, 2005; Santicola, 2013; Ward, 2014).

Positive peer pressure. Along with the congeniality of the group, respondents commented that there was an element of peer pressure that positively impacted the experience (Blackley & Sheffield, 2015; Gardner, 2008; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Ward, 2014; Wisker et al., 2007). Participant D said, "We push each other." The phrase "finish together" was used by 50%

of the respondents, and it reflects their investment in each other and their drive to move together through the program (Santicola, 2013). While a couple of participants were careful to warn future students not to be competitive *against* one another, the cohort seemed to appreciate the experience of "challenging" one another and "helping each other" get through the coursework (Tisdell et al., 2004). When asked if a negative form of competition ever developed, Participant E said, "I don't think so. At least for me, it was more of a motivator [to prove myself] and less of the pressure to win."

Relevance to the profession. Participant K, whose dissertation proposal focusses on the college and career readiness of the district's students, said, "This program was definitely beneficial from the research I was doing to how to apply it to the coursework. For every course, I made a connection for college and career readiness." Participant F said the program "limited the busy work as much as possible. Instead it focused on application and knowledge. . . . learning about the system change approach to education. I never would've learned that had not been for my doctorate." When reflecting on choosing between the blended cohort approach and a more traditional, Participant J shared what she had heard from some colleagues who took the traditional program approach and said, "They shared that what they were learning was traditional. It was study, write, repeat. It did not seem to have the same meaning that we were instilling in our learning. The 21st century component felt new and fun." The students appreciated the program's intentional planning of authentic tasks as they connected the rigorous academic work to relevant situations in the profession (Dondlinger & Jones, 2008; Knowles, 1984; McGrath, 2009; Zheng, 2010).

During the doctoral program, Participant E switched positions within the school district. She was particularly positive when discussing the impact of the technological aspects of the

program and said, “I’ve added technology components to almost everything I do now. Every time we have collaboration with departments, I’m constantly teaching the new technology [that I’ve learned] to add not just to their classroom but to their personal tech skills.” For this student, the relevance of the doctoral curriculum to her professional life was particularly evident and immediately useful. In a similar way, Participant A appreciated the support she received from the institution’s faculty and administration in the formation of her dissertation questions and her desire to keep her unique topic relevant to her interests and professional passion. When asked how the institution supported her in this area she shared, “They let me follow my interests . . . [and] tried to support what I want to do rather than curb it. Not only are they supportive, they are actually interested and are helping me research!” Participant F believed that the program could and should continue to grow in this area. He said, “Take a lesson from common core. Don’t do something that’s a fad. Keep it relevant. Keep it real.”

Flexibility. Echoing the literature that supports the cohort model, many participants shared that the flexibility of the blended program was a much desired, or even necessary component of the program (Gardner, 2000; Giannoukous et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2014; Korr et al., 2012; Sogunro, 2015). When asked if they would enter a blended cohort again, some said they would *only* join a blended cohort. Some cited the time restraints of a working professional; others cited the need to balance home life as well. Participant A said, “I felt like the blended model really supported and catered to my life as far as being a working professional.” The blend of synchronous and asynchronous learning combined with the face-to-face interactions, either required by the institution or voluntarily supported by the participants, provided the flexibility and opportunity for these professionals to engage in higher learning and pursue a personal and professional goal.

Struggles and concerns within the program. One of the main struggles that the participants shared was extra burden that came with the doctoral program and how it required sacrifice and self-discipline (Gardner, 2009; Knowles, 1984; Nimer, 2009; Wisker et al., 2007). Participant D commented it required "quite a bit of self-discipline. That was very new to me, compared to other cohort experiences that I have had. Before, I have been hand-held through the process, and here I was more left to my own devices." Some respondents attributed some of their success in overcoming the stresses and expectations of the doctoral work to the support of their families. Participant K, who has three children under the age of 13, said, "My sons, my family, my wife has been very, very, very supportive, and that's really enabled me to get to this point." This point was supported by the pre- and post-test survey with 69% of the cohort members specifically mentioning spouses and children as a source of support.

Another main struggle that emerged from the interview was the difficultly of some courses. Statistics was specifically mentioned by over half of the respondents. Participant A said, "Statistics was a hard class but the professor wasn't hard to get along with." Participant L said, "Overall, the content of the class was really too hard for me. I just did not get it and I can't use it now." While there were some frustrating moments with courses, faculty members, or the university administration, the group relied on its social structure, the relationship between the members. Participant A shared, "The group would basically suck it up, and talk together, and decide how much we wanted to complain." Although many researchers focused on the idea that the cohort model helped to mitigate member anxiety through the rigorous academic demands of a doctoral program, the theme of facing struggles and concerns within the program was soberly reflected in the literature (Akyol & Garrison, 2008; Bandura, 1977; Gardner, 2008; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Rhodes, 2013).

Lifelong learning. In response to the first question about experiencing individual success, Participant G said, "I would say yes. I have been able to become a student of research again, so I've grown in areas through knowledge and studying." Participant K said, "I look at this [program] as a big couple of years of intense staff development." Particularly when they shared about the Friday study sessions, participants shared comments like, "We became learners together," and "That was a pretty powerful opportunity."

Some students shared that they felt and saw the "cohort in action" on the Washington DC trip. In an environment that was very different from their own school district, Participant H shared that she could put into practice the learning from the finance course when they were discussing budgets with a policy maker. "I had an understanding about why some things are happening and why other things are not happening." The idea of learning as a lifelong endeavor is not unique to this study, but is heavily reflected in the literature that supports adult learning, social learning, transformational learning, and the cohort model (Bandura, 1977; Gardner, 2009; Knowles, 1979, 1984; Maher, 2005; Mezirow & Taylor, 2007; Wan et al., 2012)

Cohort vs. non-cohort. The overwhelming theme that emerged from the hours and hours of phone interviews was that the social and supportive cohort structure was a foundational element in the members' extraordinary success, 100% of the cohort completing 100% of the coursework (Gardner, 2008; Knowles, 1979, 1984; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Maher, 2005; Tisdell et al., 2004; Ward, 2014; Wisker et al., 2007). One member of the group who was pivotal in forming the cohort and contracting with the institution shared with the researcher how he felt during his Master's program. Participant I said, "You know, when I first started developing this cohort, I remembered doing my masters and said, 'Gosh, it's so difficult to do it by yourself.' And I remember spending those late nights just by myself, always stuck." He went on to say,

"For me, the cohort piece has been very powerful because I don't feel like I'm doing it alone." Participant D said, "I find the cohort model doesn't let somebody fall down. Your peers are there to pick you up." Participant F added, "I would not have even done this program if it hadn't been for this cohort. The fact that we have this cohort made it work."

Summary

In this chapter, an introduction was given regarding the data analysis and statistical tests that were to be discussed and in which order they would be addressed. This was followed by a presentation of the descriptive statistics of the cohort members in the study as well as analysis of the survey data, including paired-*t* tests from the pre- and post-test surveys from the start and the end of their doctoral coursework. Finally, analysis of the qualitative data, the observation and the interviews, revealed themes that concurred with current literature that promotes the theories behind the blended cohort delivery for higher education. These theories included andragogy, Social Learning Theory, Community of Inquiry, and Transformational Theory. The next chapter will present a summary of the purpose and structure of the study, the themes that emerged from the data, the conclusions of those findings, and the implication for further research.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

As previously mentioned, this research study was conducted to explore the indicators of success for the participants in a blended doctoral cohort. In the preceding chapter, the presentation and analysis of the data were reported. Chapter 5 begins with a summary of the study, including relevant literature and the methods of research. Discussion of the findings, implications for practice, and recommendations for further research will lead to final conclusions of the study. The purpose of the latter sections is to expand upon themes that were revealed in the data and further connect them to the scholarly theories and research from Chapter 2 that supported the study. In addition, ideas for research that will further examine the blended cohort model at the doctoral level are suggested by the researcher. Finally, a synthesizing conclusion is offered to capture the substance and scope of what has been attempted in this study.

Summary of the Study

Chapters 1 and 2 explained that much research has applauded the cohort model as an effective tool for adult students in higher education (Drago-Severson et al., 2001; Maher, 2005; Yener, 2013); however, as the global learning environment evolves, moving the cohort model into the 21st-century world of e-learning, distance learning, or blended learning continues to require more scholarly inquiry about what it takes to be a successful educational model (Campbell, 2015; Jones et al., 2014; Korr et al., 2012; Monteiro et al., 2013; Nimer, 2009; Power & Vaughan, 2010). Quality, relevance, flexibility, and value are particularly important to adult professionals who return to the academic arena for greater professional development and personal fulfillment. As cited in Chapter 1, the learner's perspective is often ignored when

studying pedagogical methods and curriculum design (Yener, 2013). The learner's perspective of the program provides valuable insight into the quality of the learning and the value of the degree.

This study sought the learners' perspectives from one unique cohort of doctoral students. The primary goal of this study was to test the research questions that related to the indicators of success for a blended cohort at the doctoral level. These research questions were grounded in Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory. The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008) expanded on Social Learning Theory to examine blended learning environments that may include synchronous and asynchronous environments, and the questions about technology specifically connected this framework to the perceptions of the participants.

Another secondary research question focused on Transformational Theory (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009), examining if learners transformed from practitioners to researchers through the blended cohort model and how the cohort's social structure supported that transformation. Because scholarly research was a foundational outcome of the doctoral program in which the students engaged, this theory supported the questions and the methodology of the pre and post-test survey. While the students may embark on a doctoral program with a goal of completion and advancement, both professionally and personally, it may not be until the end of the program that they are able to look back and see how far they have come, how much they have transformed. Personal reflection is a key element in Transformational Theory and it was intriguing to see where an individual's personal transformation intersected with the cohort's group transformation.

As explained in Chapter 3, separate quantitative and qualitative instruments were used to test these questions; therefore, this study employed a mixed methods strategy in which both types of data were collected to more intimately examine and understand the phenomena of this

cohort. A purposive sample was chosen to study a special population of blended cohort participants. While the sample was relatively small with only 16 participants, the exploration of this purposive sample allowed the researcher to closely analyze a relatively fixed group that shared a common geographical area and common employment. Because of this unique factor, this cohort was a sample from which conclusions could be drawn about blended cohorts, while factoring out differences in location and differences in district demands.

The quantitative analysis derived from the pre and post-test survey. The qualitative analysis of this study involved extensive immersion into the details of the data as the researcher coded, categorized, reflected, and interpreted not only the responses on the pre and post-test surveys, but also in the lengthy follow-up interviews which followed a script of questions directly related to the research questions. A list of significant statements and direct quotes were accumulated to support the emerging themes and provide specific evidence for the findings. Respondents often related real-life experiences, both positive and negative, to illustrate how the blended cohort model contributed to their success as individuals and as a group.

Discussion of the Findings

Previous researchers have studied the cohort model as an effective delivery method for institutions that want to support adult student success in higher education (Beckem & Watkins, 2012; McCarthy et al., 2015; Rausch & Crawford, 2012; Ward, 2014). Not much research, however, had focused on the participants' perceptions of the experience of pursuing a degree in higher education within a blended cohort. This focus could reveal a closer look at how the cohort model, particularly the blended cohort, could support the student's success in the program. The goal of this study was to reveal these perceptions within a small group of participants that work in a common district. Seven main themes emerged from the data: (1)

Congeniality; (2) Positive peer pressure; (3) Relevance; (4) Flexibility; (5) Struggles and concerns; (6) Lifelong learning; and (7) Cohort vs. non-cohort. This section discusses the implications of the findings for each of the research questions as it integrates the seven main themes throughout the discussion.

Research Question One. The primary goal of this study was to test the research questions that related to the indicators of success for a blended cohort at the doctoral level. Specifically, this research investigated the experiences of individual cohort members, the perceptions of the cohort as a whole group, and the learners' perceptions of the doctoral program that delivered instruction through the blended cohort model. The primary finding about this study was that the participants overwhelmingly credited the cohesiveness of their cohort for their success. As many participants shared, they started with 16 participants and they ended the coursework with the same 16 participants. That is a 100% completion rate for the coursework phase of the doctoral program (Tisdell et al., 2004). The congeniality of the group fostered a culture of positive peer pressure that encouraged, and sometimes pushed participants (Bandura, 1977; Blackley & Sheffield, 2015; Halloway & Alexandre, 2012; Maher, 2005; Ward, 2014).

In the paired *t*-tests, the only calculation that demonstrated any significant change was the Blended Cohort Experience Average score. This detail, combined with the overwhelming qualitative evidence, revealed the positive feelings participants had for their cohort members and the general cohort structure. While only 38% of the participants shared that they had prior experience in a learning cohort, all 12 who participated in a follow-up interview answered that the collaborative and social characteristics of the group contributed greatly to the success of the group (Greenlee & Karanxha, 2010; Maher, 2005; Nimer, 2009; Wan et al., 2012). Even members who shared more negative feelings or experiences were quick to highlight the positive

aspects of the cohort model. As one participant stated, "The cohort model is basically the strongest model that you can use so that you're supported emotionally and academically." The congeniality of the group again played a major role in the positive feelings that supported the cohort structure over a more traditional, non-cohort approach (Bandura, 1977; Drago-Severson et al., 2001; Halloway & Alexandre, 2012; Maher, 2005; Ward, 2014).

At the start of the study, participants' responses in the pre-test survey reflected their realistic expectations of the demanding doctoral workload. An interesting finding was that 88% of them cited their colleagues and cohort members as main sources of support through the rigorous coursework. That percentage was unchanged two years later. This data reflected the themes of congeniality and the culture of positive peer pressure that urged the cohort members through the rigorous coursework. The literature of Chapter 2 is imbued with research supporting the philosophy that people learn better when they work collaboratively, building encouraging and lasting relationships with a common goal of program completion (Bandura, 1977; Blackley & Sheffield, 2015; Drago-Severson et al., 2001; Greenlee & Karanxha, 2010; Halloway & Alexandre, 2012; Knowles, 1984; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Maher, 2005; Sogunro, 2015; Ward, 2014).

While the researcher sought to differentiate between the individual's perceptions of himself and his perceptions of the group, there seemed to be more areas of overlap than areas of difference. In Chapter 1, the researcher hypothesized that the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison & Akyol, 2013) would increase the cohort members' sense of comfort and confidence. One participant repeatedly touted the Friday afternoon study session as a point of success and strength for both the individual and the group. This voluntary phenomenon was perhaps the most glaring example of the theoretical framework because the Friday study session

synergistically combined teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence to academically and culturally support not only the individual but also the group. The group enjoyed being together, appreciated challenging each other, and supported each other through the demanding work.

Interestingly, however, it appeared that the cohort members were often the ones providing all three components of the framework, and it did not necessarily matter if a faculty member was present. This realization did not completely agree with the researcher's second assumption that students would have a higher perception of academic success when they experienced greater interaction with their professors. Instead, this phenomenon supported the theme of lifelong learning, and, sometimes, relevance. Sharing so many common goals and experiences, the cohort members were able to seek and find the relevant relationships between the course theories and assessments and the school district in which most the cohort members still worked.

Regarding the theme of struggles and concerns, while there were some qualitative data that revealed close and appreciative relationships with faculty, there were also some examples of strained relationships. When the individuals in the cohort needed more academic support, they generally sought out peer support first; similarly, when several members of the cohort needed more academic support, their systematic approach was to discuss the issue as a cohort and elect one or two members to take the issue or the questions to the professor or the institution. The researcher assumed that when professors did not actively engage with the class, the cohort members would look to each other for guidance, instructions, and support. This assumption was accurate for the studied participants; however, it neither appeared to be a negative attribute, nor did it only occur when professors were disengaged. Once again, the congeniality of the group,

the genuine trust and care among the members, propelled each participant from one challenge to the next (Bandura, 1977; Blackley & Sheffield, 2015; Halloway & Alexandre, 2012; Maher, 2005; Ward, 2014).

The final part of the primary research question studied the learners' perceptions of the doctoral program that delivered instruction through the blended cohort model. The data revealed some mixed results and some areas for further research. In the semi-structured interviews, once the researcher shifted the questions off the cohort and on to the institution's role in the coursework, the tone of the participants shifted from being supportive, positive, and even enthusiastic, to being a bit more critical, though still positive, overall. This shift in tone may have reflected a sense of separation between the cohort and the faculty, or even the cohort and institution. As discussed earlier, the cohort firmly believed that they had established a Community of Inquiry (CoI) (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008) with social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence; however, some believed that the most glaring example of teaching presence was the Friday study session when the cohort members would work together, support each other, and teach each other through the curriculum.

Considering that the cohort was formed from professional educators - teachers, administrators, and coaches – it was not unexpected that the members knew how to self-teach. Participants shared their appreciation that the institution and the faculty took a mentoring role that supported students, checked for understanding, and provided a pathway for students to attain their doctoral degree. In the survey data, the most popular response that answered why the participants entered the program revealed that intrinsic, personal motivation to continue one's education through lifelong learning was the primary reason.

Flowing from that desire to attain a doctoral degree and further one's personal and professional educational goals, participants were generally thankful for the support and flexibility they received from their faculty and the institution. Students did not feel detached from their professors even though they may have been separated by hundreds of miles (Gardner, 2008; Wisker et al., 2007). This was particularly concerning at the start of the program when 44% of the surveyed participants felt that the lack of personal connection would be the biggest drawback of the blended model; similarly, on the post-test, 50% agreed that a lack of personal connection to the institution was a drawback. Because many of the cohort members were already personally and professionally connected in a congenial way, the researcher could infer that the concern centered on a perceived lack of connection with professors.

A few negative comments revolved around professors not interacting with the cohort members as if they were professional adults. While this sentiment did not appear to be the majority feeling, nor did it pertain to most of the professors, it was not an outlier as a finding. Regarding the themes of relevance, particularly as it applied to andragogy (Knowles, 1984), and struggles and concerns of the program, the participants felt frustration when a professor did not communicate with them as if they were highly trained professionals in the same field. Additionally, participants did not appreciate assignments and assessments that did not realistically relate to their professional field (Campbell, 2015; Chen, 2012; McGrath, 2009; Monteiro et al., 2013; Power & Vaughan, 2010). In fact, these critical comments sparked ideas for further research, for the students, the teachers, and the institution that will be discussed later in this chapter.

Research Question Two. Because of the technological emphasis of the blended program, a significant secondary research question focused on the relationship between

perceived technological skills at the beginning of the program to the perceptions of students' technological skills at the end of the program. Did the students believe they had the necessary technological skills at the beginning of the program and did they believe that was an accurate assessment at the end of the program? In Chapter 1, the researcher assumed that students who struggled with technological aspects would rely on the cohort model for early success. This assumption was affirmed in the data; however, the second part of the assumption did not occur. The researcher thought that the students who could not adjust to the technological demands of the courses would feel isolated from the curriculum and instruction. The data revealed that within the study sample, the congenial, supportive nature of the cohort negated the sense of isolation.

The survey and interview data suggested the technological requirements were not a major factor in the success of the cohort participants for two main reasons. First, while some participants shared that they had experienced some technological difficulties, they also admitted that they relied on the technological strengths of the cohort. The cohesiveness of the group proved to be a strength that outweighed any technological deficiencies, and the flexibility that derived from the technology was greatly appreciated by the group. Those who admittedly battled with hardware and software issues sought support from those who could help solve the problematic and concerning issues. For example, the cohort had a couple experts embedded as members, and when difficulties arose, participants did not hesitate to ask for assistance. In addition to a comfortability in seeking help, in both the pre and post-test surveys, over two-thirds of the participants shared that they felt compelled to try and help others who experienced trouble. This survey feedback backed up interview data that revealed the group's sense of comfort and security with each other, even when technological challenges appeared.

Some participants shared that their comfort levels with educational technology grew significantly and that they were trying to share their new knowledge and proficiency with other educators in the district. While some research has recommended technological readiness for a blended doctoral cohort (Ralph, 2012), it appeared that the social strength of the cohort in this study more than compensated for any individual weaknesses. If anything, the study confirmed other researchers' points of view that the faculty and institution needed more technological readiness as they were required to embed e-learning effectively (Winter et al., 2010). The technological aspects of the program contributed to the appreciated flexibility and relevance as participants integrated some of the newly developed skills in their professional lives.

The cohesiveness of the cohort led to a second reason why the technological requirements were not a major factor in the success of the participants; it was because of the cohort's sense of empathy and solidarity. The cohort participants often reflected that they were *in this together* and that they would *push* each other through any course, any challenge (Santicola, 2013). In other words, there would be no man nor woman left behind. The technological challenges that arose throughout the program were perceived as blips, small challenges in the big picture. As one participant remarked, "It seemed so seamless… or easy."

By the end of the two-year coursework, empathetic statements decreased from 25% to 19%; however, it did not appear as though the empathetic characteristic of the members decreased as much as the need to be empathetic about technology decreased. By the end of the program, each participant had figured out the required technology and the demands became routine expectations. Similarly, as viewed in the survey data, perceived frustration about technological struggles decreased from 13% to 6%. This decrease over a two-year period flowed from not only a lack of major frustrations, but also a group-wide understanding that the

technological components were just tools in the delivery model. Overall, the cohort participants valued the flexibility of the blended program and found that the technological aspects added relevance to their professional lives (Gardner, 2000; Giannoukous et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2014; Korr et al., 2012; McGrath, 2009; Nimer, 2009; Sogunro, 2015).

Even though most of the learning activity was centered on the synchronous or asynchronous learning of the blended system, the participants in the study focused more on each other as a human support-system; they also sought more personal relationships with their professors when possible, even if that came through digital means. This finding supported research in Chapter II which highlighted that technology had become a very important tool for expanding educational access, but also admitted that technology is a tool, not an environment (Bransford et al., 2000). Finally, empathy, cohesiveness, and congeniality seemed to be an ingrained trait with this cohort, and the emotional bonds that they shared with each other forged a sense of solidarity that supported the individuals, especially in times of personal or academic struggles. In the theme of cohort versus non-cohort, the participants loudly cheered the benefits of the supportive structure.

Research Question Three. Another secondary research question focused on the personal or professional transformation of the participants as scholarly writers, educational leaders, and lifelong learners. Conducting scholarly research was an institutional outcome of the program, and the researcher asked the participants' perceptions of their transformation over the two-year coursework in the cohort model. Were learners transformed from practitioners to researchers through the blended cohort model and how did the cohort social structure support that transformation? As discussed in Chapter 2, scholarly writing readiness is a necessity for students beginning a doctoral program (Maher & Barnes, 2010); however, the researcher asked

participants to reflect on their transformation from practitioners to researchers. At this point, Mezirow and Taylor's (2009) Transformational Theory was utilized for observations of the doctoral students in this study. Transformational Theory expands Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory by emphasizing the changed personal or professional identity above the acquisition of skill or knowledge. Not only is it a constructivist theory that focuses on adult learning, Mezirow and Taylor's (2009) theory requires personal reflection that can be viewed as a series of signposts that label learners' paths from one identity to another (Hodge, 2014). This study collected reflective insights from the participants.

Based on the available literature, the researcher assumed that imbuing the cohort pathway with both social learning and transformative theories would positively impact the cohort members. The data revealed that the participants felt that whatever transformations they had experienced where heavily supported by the cohort structure; however, not all participants felt that they had fully transformed from practitioners to researchers. Although the transformative experience was not perceived by all, the cohort's course-by-course path alongside trusted peers nurtured a safe place for the learners to acquire new skills and share new ideas. The participants did not experience a sense of isolation; instead, the participants championed and supported one another even when they felt discouraged with elements of the program. These findings confirmed the research of Witte and James (1998) who endorsed a cohort model for a doctoral program because of the social and transformative characteristics of the method.

Implications for Practice

As developed over that last 30 years, the cohort design for higher education has provided new opportunities for accelerated classes and communities of learning based in pedagogical theory (McCarthy et al., 2005). Cohort membership, particularly the blended cohort, caters to

the professional adult by offering a high-quality degree program with flexibility and an embedded social support structure. Rausch and Crawford (2012) explained how cohort-based learning has been on the rise for adult learners; however, this study exposes three important implications for practice.

One implication of this study was that institutions that offer higher education degrees within this model need to carefully research and ground their programs not only in Social Learning Theory but also in 21st century theories and frameworks like the Community of Inquiry (CoI) (Garrison & Akyol, 2013) and transformational theory (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). It is not enough to merely repackage traditional coursework with traditional delivery methods in a course-by-course cohort (Campbell, 2015; Monetiro et al., 2013; Power & Vaughan, 2010). Likewise, faculty should receive training in the cohort structure as an integral part of student success. Not every cohort can begin with the same level of intensity and collegiality that the cohort in this study shared; however, an institution and its faculty could prioritize the collegiality of the group, perhaps going so far as to share the researched benefits of nurturing those relationships. Another suggestion involved the reordering of curriculum to coincide with the transformational goal of scholarly research, making sure that courses built upon each other and that students were informed of how the pathway led to the ultimate goals of dissertation and degree completion. With solid theoretical background supporting the curriculum, the blended doctoral cohort program should be a dynamic, transformative journey that leans on the powerful bonds of social relationships (Henriksen et al., 2014).

Looking from the perspective of the learners, members of other cohorts could benefit from intentionally reaching out to colleagues to leverage the supportive structure of the cohort model (Halloway & Alexandre, 2012; Wisker et al., 2007). Not every cohort may be comprised

of members from one district, but that does not mean that students do not have an opportunity, or even a responsibility, to connect with others in social, professional, and academic ways. If members are not within geographic proximity, perhaps the digital flexibility of the blended delivery will help adult learners form positive relationships (Gardner, 2000; Giannoukous et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2014; Korr et al., 2012; Nimer, 2009; Sogunro, 2015). The cohort themes about congeniality and positive peer pressure could apply to any group of professionals endeavoring to complete a terminal degree, and the pressure should not lie entirely on the shoulders of the teachers at the institution (Wisker et al., 2007)

A second implication of this study was that it could behoove institutions to design their marketing to purposely form cohorts within common districts and regions. While this endeavor could take more time, it may save more students in the long run because, as one participant shared, "Geography matters." National attrition rates for a doctoral program tend to be around 50% (Stewart, 2011); however, for the cohort in this study, 100% of the students made it through the coursework phase. Although it is uncertain if the dissertation phase may have proved to be too great of a challenge for some students, the cohort began that phase with better odds than most. As identified in the findings, all of those interviewed shared similar opinions about the importance of getting to know the cohort members on personal levels and reliance on each other. Intentionally creating cohorts with geographic proximity could benefit the outcome of the group and the individuals within it.

Adult learners could also replicate what the adults in this study did by basically forming the core of the cohort *before* researching and contracting with an institution. This method put emphasis on the cohort group from the start as colleagues were agreeing on which program would gain their financial and academic commitment (Wisker et al., 2007). Gone are the days

when adult learners must choose from the institutions that are closest to their homes and workplaces. The flexibility of blended learning has created new opportunities for learners to obtain degrees from a myriad of institutions and programs (Nimer, 2009). This study revealed significant benefits for a group that shares common calendars, common goals, and common geography. Perhaps district leaders who are looking to further their academic careers might look into forming a cohort before shopping for a program that best meets the needs and goals of the learners.

A focus on Adult Learning Theory (Knowles, 1984) arose as a third implication when participants were asked how they would advise an institution that wanted to start or improve a blended doctoral cohort program. Relevance, a key factor in andragogy, arose as a theme of the findings (Giannoukous et al., 2015; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Pappas, 2013; Sogunro, 2015). Components of Adult Learning Theory that apply most to a blended doctoral cohort include the following: (1) keeping the content and projects relevant to the participants' professional lives and goals; (2) being sensitive to the adults' time constraints, particularly around finals weeks and commencement activities that might demand a great deal of an educator's time; and (3) specifically choosing and/or training faculty who view doctoral students with a high level of professional respect. These components mainly concern the institution and its planning of curriculum and training of faculty (Abdelaziz, 2012; Winter et al., 2010). These ideas should also concern the adult learners.

Limitations and Delimitations

Four specific limitations may have impacted the findings of the study. First, four of the participants declined to be interviewed. With such a small group of participants, this reflected 25% of the cohort. Two of the members declined the interview when they completed their post-

test; the other two did not respond to repeated requests for the interview. The perspectives of these participants would have added valuable perspective, particularly if they were less favorable of the blended cohort model. A second limitation arose from the small sample size. Findings cannot be generalized to an entire population; however, the themes that arose from the findings do corroborate the vast literature supporting the blended cohort model for a doctoral program. Third, the statistical tests did not reveal major significant change in the feelings of the participants. Instead, the research relied heavily on the qualitative data of the surveys and the interviews. Finally, because the researcher's doctoral program was just a few months ahead of the sample population's program, IRB approval was obtained too late for more in-depth observation of the synchronous interactions of the participants. By the time the study was approved, the participants were beginning their final class in the coursework phase. It would have benefitted the study if the researcher had observed the cohort over a longer period of time.

Three delimitations were determined by the researcher for the purpose of understanding the learners' perspectives of the blended doctoral cohort. First, the researcher was granted permission to study a particular cohort that was uniquely comprised of 16 educational leaders in one school district. By focusing only on this cohort, the researcher was able to study the learners' perspectives of the experiences while factoring out differences of location and district demands. Second, the researcher chose to focus only on the learners' perspectives; however, the perspectives of the institution's faculty and administrators could further paint the phenomenological picture that is the 21st century blended doctoral cohort. Third, the researcher chose to only focus on the coursework phase of the cohort's doctoral program. While 100% of the participants completed the two-year course of study, an interesting area for further research would be to follow these same participants through the dissertation phase of the program in order

to study if the cohort's social and collaborative structures continued to encourage and support the participants through the individual experience of writing a dissertation.

Recommendations for Further Research

In Chapter 2, an article was cited that pointed out that, because it is a relatively new framework, not enough instruments were designed to measure the three components of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Kumar, et al., 2011; Kumar & Dawson, 2012). Similarly, Yener (2013) called for more research to examine the quality of blended learning from the learner's perspective. Combining these two desires for further research, this study concluded that the blended cohort can be an extremely beneficial model for an institution and the members of the cohort; however, more research needs to be done to not only support the structure as it expands educational opportunities to more people, but also to validate the model as a viable, high-quality alternative to traditional curriculum delivery.

Further interests might include cohorts with members from different districts, programs that offer differing schedules for face-to-face time, such as week-long seminars, and universities that allow group dissertations. Additionally, studies that take more time to follow multiple cohorts within the same university could reveal interesting findings about the strength of the blended cohort model with different memberships serving as variables. As the novelty of the blended doctoral cohort model fades, it would be interesting to study how many institutions still offer the traditional cohort design or the traditional classroom design.

Conclusion

As stated in Chapter 1, this study had the potential for timely significance because of the dramatic and dynamic force of the blended cohort and how it has impacted higher education (Unzueta et al., 2008). Higher education is accessible to adult professionals in unprecedented

ways, but if the quality of the program or quality of the learner's experience is less than expected, the motivation to endure the rigors of higher education is compromised. Not only did the study contribute to the literature of the blended cohort model and the various learning theories and frameworks, but it also revealed learners' insights about how those theories manifest in the blended doctoral cohort.

Several qualitative studies have supported the cohort model as a positive delivery method for higher learning. The social structure, the personal relationships, and the collective approach to the learning have all been touted as beneficial attributes. The blended component has added a much-desired quality of flexibility for both the learners and the institution (Gardner, 2000; Giannoukous et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2014; Korr et al., 2012; Nimer, 2009; Sogunro, 2015). By integrating both synchronous face-to-face interaction, both online and in person, with asynchronous assignments and modules, adult learners can foster valuable, supportive relationships, without losing the important flexibility of class time and location.

The first research question sought to study the indicators for success for a blended doctoral cohort from the learners' perspectives. A significant connection was found between the congeniality of this cohort and their high rate of success in the coursework phase of the program. At the individual level, participants repeatedly expressed their appreciation for their cohort members as sources for academic, personal, and professional support. Learner isolation was not a reality for this cohort. At the group level, participants revealed how the cohort leveraged the collective capacity of the members for academic and technological support. The Friday afternoon study session was a particularly dynamic demonstration of this collective approach to the learning. When examining the institution's role in the success of the cohort, participants acknowledged how the institution and the faculty generally supported the collegiality of the

group. In addition, the institution fulfilled their expectations of delivering the instruction and guiding the learners through the coursework via the blended format, an appreciated advance in technology and andragogy.

The second research question sought to study how the technological readiness positively or negatively impacted the learner experience. While there may be some students and cohorts that struggle with the technological demands, this cohort did not express much opinion on the topic outside of appreciating the flexibility it brought to this experience. Overall, these participants viewed the technological aspects as tools to support the learning, and, if issues or confusion arose, the cohort relied on the technological experts of the group.

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APPENDIX A

Consent Forms
Survey & Observation: Informed Consent Form for Participation in Susan Norton's Research Study on School District Based, Blended Doctoral Program Evaluation

Dear Doctoral Student,

You are invited to participate in a research study that is trying to ascertain some of the traits and relational factors you have utilized during your doctoral program. Your answers will be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the hybrid/blended cohort doctoral program that is focused within your specific school district.

At the start of your doctoral program, you completed a survey about yourself, your technological skills, your doctoral cohort and learning expectations, and your school district. Now, at the end of the coursework phase of your program, you are being asked to address those same questions and reflect on your experiences throughout the program. Your answers will be kept confidential and the researchers will not be able to designate any participate to a specific set of answers. If you have any questions please feel free to ask the researcher, Susan Norton, or email Dr. Hartzell, the supervising faculty for this research (Stephanie.Hartzell@cui.edu). At any time you may email Susan Norton at Susan.Norton@eagles.cui.edu.

You do not have to participate in this study and you can stop participating in the study at any time. It is not expected that the survey will cause distress or discomfort; however, if at any time you feel uncomfortable, please feel free to stop responding to the survey and turn it in to the envelope. You participation will help provide data for a research study that is studying the phenomenon of the blended doctoral cohort from the learners' perspective. It is hoped that the research will help the institution and the higher education community to better understand the indicators of success for this type of learning model.

Again, please note that your responses to this study are confidential. In the future, follow-up interviews will be conducted and your participation would be appreciated again. At the end of the ADULT INFORMED CONSENT FORM you will find a signature line. If you are willing to participate in an interview at a later date, please put an X on the appropriate line as well.

Thank you,
Susan K. Norton
The extra copy of this consent form is for your records.

ADULT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

The study in which you are being asked to participate is designed to investigate the blended doctoral cohort model within a single school district. This study is being conducted by Susan K. Norton, under the supervision of Dr. Stephanie Hartzell, Assistant Professor in the School of Education, Concordia University, Irvine. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board, Concordia University Irvine, in Irvine, CA.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this study is to test the indicators of success for a blended cohort at the doctoral level. Specifically, this research investigates the experiences of individual cohort members, the perceptions of the cohort as a whole group, and the learners' perceptions of the doctoral program that delivered instruction through the blended cohort model. Because of the technological emphasis of the blended program, a significant secondary research question focuses on the relationship between perceived technological skills at the beginning of the program to the perceptions of students' technological skills at the end of the program.
DESCRIPTION: You are being asked to fill in a survey that asks some questions about your experience in this doctoral cohort. You may also be asked to participate in a follow-up interview. The researcher will be observing the cohort in both a face-to-face situation and online in a synchronous situation.
PARTICIPATION: Your participation is completely voluntary and you may discontinue participation at any time. You do not need to participate to receive cookies and drinks. It is provided as a convenience for you.
CONFIDENTIALITY OR ANONYMITY: Your identity will remain completely anonymous, and neither the district's name nor the university's name will be reported. The findings, reported in my doctoral dissertation, will simply say that data was collected at a site within a central Californian school district. All data, recordings, and findings will be stored either in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home, or in the researcher's private computer that is protected by security software and passwords. All records will be destroyed by January 1, 2018.
DURATION: The researcher plans to observe three different situations: (1) a Friday night study session; (2) a Saturday face-to-face class; and (3) a Synchronous online class. The entire data collection phase should last from December 18, 2015 - May 31, 2016. The survey should take about ten minutes to complete, but follow-up interviews may take 30-60 minutes.
RISKS: It is not expected that the survey or interviews will cause distress or discomfort; however, if at any time you feel uncomfortable, please let the researcher know and discontinue participation if appropriate. The researcher will be a non-participant observer and will try to avoid being a distraction during the class sessions.
BENEFITS: Participants may benefit from the self-reflection inherent in the survey and the follow-up interviews as they look back on the coursework phase of the doctoral program and realize how far they have come. The higher education community will benefit from a better understanding of the blended cohort model, and the institution (CUI) may benefit by improving the program for future cohorts.
VIDEO/AUDIO/PHOTOGRAPH: Consent form will be given to participants.
CONTACT: For questions about the research and research participants' rights, or in the event of a research-related injury, please contact Dr. Stephanie Hartzell, dissertation committee chair: (949) 214-3540, Stephanie.Hartzell@cui.edu.
RESULTS: The results of this study will be published in the researcher's doctoral dissertation at Concordia University Irvine.

CONFIRMATION STATEMENT:

I agree to participate in the research study described.

SIGNATURE:

Print Name **Signature** **Date**

_____ Yes, I am willing to participate in an interview at a later date.
_____ No, I would rather not be involved.

PHOTOGRAPHY/VIDEO/AUDIO USE INFORMED CONSENT FORM

As part of this research project studying the phenomenon of the blended doctoral cohort, we will be making a digital audio/video recording of you during your participation in the experiment (via iPhone voice memo and/or GoPro Camera). Please indicate below that you give your consent for the recording by initialing and signing this consent form.
We will only use the photograph/videotape/audiotape in the following way:

> ***The video/audio recording can be studied by the research team for the purpose of playing back the recording to accurately review and transcribe the observations and interactions.***

In any use of this recording, your name would not be identified. If you do not initial the space below, the recording will be destroyed. If you would rather that the recording not be made in the first place, you may request that now and the researcher will take notes on paper instead.
The digital recording will be stored in the researcher's private computer and will be deleted at the completion the experiment.

Please indicate the type of informed consent.

The digital video/audio recording can be studied by the research team for use in the research project. Please initial _____

I have read the above description and give my consent for the use of the photograph/videotape/audiotape as indicated above.

Print Name **Signature** **Date**

The extra copy of this consent form is for your record.

APPENDIX B

Doctoral Cohort Information Sheet

The following information will be used to describe characteristics of respondents to this survey in a summary form. The information provided is confidential.

PLEASE ANSWER EVERY ITEM.

Demographic information:

1. Gender (check): [ ] Female [ ] Male
2. Age (check): [ ] <25 [ ] 26 – 30 [ ] 31 – 35 [ ] 36 – 40 [ ] 41 – 45 [ ] 46+

Technology information:

1. Age of your computer/laptop (check): [ ] <1yr. [ ] 2–3yrs [ ] 4–5yrs [ ] 6+yrs

2. Did you plan on purchasing a new computer/laptop (check)? [ ] yes [ ] no

If so, when did you purchase a new computer/laptop? _____

3. In which social media applications are you active (check all that apply)?

[ ] none [ ] Facebook [ ] Twitter [ ] Instagram [ ] Edmodo [ ] others _____

4. In the past, have you sought out computer application training? [ ] yes [ ] no

If so, how many times (per year) do you receive training? [ ] <1 [ ] 1-3 [ ] 4-8 [ ] 8+

Technology information: (circle the appropriate response)	Very Poor	Below Average	Average	Above Average	Excellent
How would you rate your digital skills in regard to internet browsing?	1	2	3	4	5
How would you rate your digital skills in regard to cloud storage?	1	2	3	4	5
How would you rate your skills in regard to presentation applications (ex. PREZI)?	1	2	3	4	5
What is your comfort level with social media (ex. Twitter, Facebook, etc.)?	1	2	3	4	5

Cohort information:

1. What was your purpose for entering this doctoral program?

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. Had you ever participated in an online or blended academic program? [ ] yes [ ] no

   If yes: What were some of the benefits of the online or blended format?

   _____

   _____

   What were some of the drawbacks of the online or blended format?

   _____

   _____

   If no: What did you anticipate would be some of the benefits of the online or blended format?

   _____

   _____

   What did you anticipate would be some of the drawbacks of the online or blended format?

   _____

   _____

3. When others around me struggle with technology, I feel . . _____

   _____

   _____

4. Outside of work, how many hours a week did you dedicate to your doctoral program?

   _____

5. Besides work and this doctoral program, what have been the other significant demands on your time? (check any that apply)

[ ] Spouse [ ] Children [ ] Parents [ ] Another job [ ] Hobbies [ ] Health concerns

[ ] Other (please explain) _____

6. Name three sources of support that you relied upon to help you through this doctoral program. _____

Cohort information: (circle the appropriate response)	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I feel comfortable working in face-to-face groups.	1	2	3	4	5
I feel comfortable working in online groups.	1	2	3	4	5
I expect my group members to be technologically proficient for online work.	1	2	3	4	5
I am willing to help others who are struggling with the digital components of blended learning.	1	2	3	4	5

School District information:

1. Do you think that this doctoral program will help your school district? [ ] yes [ ] no

Why or why not? _____
_____
_____
_____

School District information: (circle the appropriate response)	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I understand the issues facing my school district.	1	2	3	4	5
I can have an impact on decisions made within my school district.	1	2	3	4	5
I know people in other departments within my school district.	1	2	3	4	5
My department's issues are important to my school district's administration.	1	2	3	4	5
My school district's administration functions as a cohesive unit.	1	2	3	4	5
My school district's administration values my opinion.	1	2	3	4	5

I can help my school district to become more adept at helping all students.	1	2	3	4	5
I understand issues that are facing other departments.	1	2	3	4	5
My school district values cooperative problem solving.	1	2	3	4	5
My school district values open communication between departments.	1	2	3	4	5

APPENDIX C

Doctoral Cohort Interview Questions

The following semi-structured interview questions may be used for further qualitative research following the post-test survey.

1. Change from Beginning to End: I have just shared with you the results of the survey, particularly any change between the pre-test and the post-test. Are these the results you expected? (Follow up questions will be asked to determine why or why not, and which parts of the results, if only some, were a surprise, but that might be shared in response to the initial question.)

2. Questions regarding the participant's individual experience: Do you believe you have experienced individual success in this program? If yes, what ways have you been successful? If no, what areas do you think have been less-than successful? What factors do think have contributed to your individual success within this cohort?
    a. Regarding Technology: How prepared were you for the technological demands for this blended program? Did you improve your skills? If yes, how did you accomplish that improvement? If no, how did you overcome the deficiency? In what ways did you struggle with technology? How did the technological aspect of the blended program impact your personal experiences with the program?

3. Questions regarding the participant's experience within and as part of a social learning group (cohort): How do you believe the cohort has been successful in its social, collective approach to the coursework? In what ways was the cohort successful together? If any, in what ways was the cohort unsuccessful or prohibitive to individual/group success? What are some characteristics of your cohort that have been particularly beneficial to the success of the group? Please describe the positive or negative relationships within the cohort.

   a. Regarding Technology: How prepared was the group (as a whole) for the technological demands for this blended program? How did you (as an individual) respond when there were technological difficulties? How did the group respond? How did the institution (faculty/admin) respond?

4. Questions regarding the participant's perspective of the institution's role in the success of the group (cohort): How has the institution supported your individual success throughout the program? How has the institution fostered the cohort relationships and the social structure of the cohort? How have teachers interacted with the cohort group, either positively or negatively? What did you expect from the institution (the faculty or administration) and were your expectations met?

5. Questions regarding social learning theory (Bandura, 1977): Are you familiar with Social Learning theory? If yes, what is your opinion of importance of social learning theory within the cohort experience? Do you believe you would be as successful in a doctoral program if you were not in a cohort? Please give examples of social learning theory in your experience.

6. Questions regarding the community of inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Akyol & Garrison, 2008): Building upon social learning theory, the community of inquiry framework requires three components for success: (1) teaching presence; (2) social presence; and (3) cognitive presence. How do you believe your cohort created a CoI based on these three factors? From your perspective, how did these components contribute to your individual success and/or the success of the cohort group?
   a. Teaching Presence:
   b. Social Presence:
   c. Cognitive Presence:

7. Questions regarding transformational theory (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009): One outcome for a doctoral program is to transform from a practitioner to a researcher. Do you believe you have made that transition? In what ways has that transition been supported by the

cohort group? In what ways has that transition been supported by the cohort program (the institution)? Please give examples of how you have been transformed by this doctoral cohort experience.

8. Reflection: Describe a positive experience from your cohort program. How do think that experience would have been different if you had been in a traditional program (non-cohort, non-blended)? Describe a negative experience from your cohort program. How do think that experience would have been different if you had been in a traditional program (non-cohort, non-blended)?

9. Words of Advice: From your perspective, what would be your *words of wisdom* for:
    a. An individual going through a blended doctoral program in the future?
    b. A cohort beginning a blended doctoral program together?
    c. An institution looking to start a blended doctoral program or looking to improve an existing blended program?

10. If you were to start a doctoral program again, would you seek a blended cohort again? Why or why not?