

THE PERCEPTIONS OF EDUCATION DOCTORAL STUDENTS AND GRADUATES  
CONCERNING THEIR EXPERIENCES OF THRIVING DURING THE TRANSITION TO  
INDEPENDENT RESEARCHERS

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty  
of the  
North Dakota State University  
of Agriculture and Applied Science

By

Simeon Osamuyimen Edosomwan

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major Program:  
Education  
Option: Occupational and Adult Education

May 2018

Fargo, North Dakota

North Dakota State University  
Graduate School

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**Title**

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The Supervisory Committee certifies that this *disquisition* complies with North Dakota  
State University's regulations and meets the accepted standards for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

Dr. Claudette Peterson

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Chair

Dr. Myron Eighmy

---

Dr. Florin Salajan

---

Dr. Ashley Baggett

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Approved:

June 28, 2018

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Date

Dr. Chris Ray

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Department Chair

## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines the perceptions of education doctoral students and graduates in two upper Midwest research universities in the United States concerning their experiences of thriving during the transition to independent researchers. Thriving is a multi-faceted construct that describes positive human functioning and development. Twelve participants, four doctoral graduates and eight active doctoral candidates in the discipline of education, participated in a semi-structured interview conversation that resulted in the data utilized for this study. The data was carefully organized and analyzed by the study research questions. The study was guided by a central research question and four sub-research questions.

Informed by a phenomenology methodology and a process of interpretive analysis participants experiences were synthesized and discussed using their actual expressions. In reading and reflecting on the data, significant statements that provided the understanding of how participants experience thriving as they transition to independent researchers were identified. These significant statements were useful in developing clusters of meaning about what shapes study participants' experience of thriving in the doctoral learning context. From the analysis of data, four emergent themes: Digging-in, Commitment, Supportive relationships, and Persistence, offers the knowledge and major understanding concerning how participants experienced thriving during the transition to independent researchers, and overall, during their doctoral journey. The knowledge from this study is useful for promoting thriving of doctoral students in education and other related disciplines. It offers insights, experiences, and proactive initiatives for thriving during doctoral students' transitions to independent researchers.

Keyword: Attrition, Doctoral students, Research, Transition, and Thriving.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The goal to study for a doctorate began as a simple dream due to the positive influence and inspiration I draw from my late father who never had a Ph.D., but his love for education and learning was impeccable. In many ways, this accomplishment is dedicated to him for the foundation he gave me. He encouraged me to work hard, seek learning, and wisdom in any way I can and here I am today. I was also motivated to embark on this remarkable journey due to the inspiration I draw from some of the instructors who taught me during my undergraduate years in college. They simply came to class to teach their academic subjects but unknown to them, they influenced and mentored me by their dispositions. The result was a burning learning desire I developed and has metamorphosed into my Ph.D. accomplishment. I am indeed thankful to them for their legacy and impactful footprints I emulated.

This disquisition is intended to inspire and support more doctoral students with meaningful insights and initiatives that promotes thriving during the transition to independent researchers and in particular, during the dissertation research experience. Thriving is a multi-dimensional construct that describes positive functioning and development in human experiences. It seems like a very basic idea, something that all of us pursuing doctoral studies should know. However, the rate of attrition and the number of doctoral students who do not complete their dissertation tell a different story. I therefore, felt compelled to channel my intellectual energy to conduct this research in the hopes that it could have a positive impact on how current and future doctoral students approach doctoral studies.

As I reach the climax of this doctoral journey, after many tired nights of extensive reading, inadequate sleep, frequent meetings with my advisor, and writing over 200 pages for this disquisition, I find myself short of words to adequately express my gratitude for all who

have supported me in attaining this monumental goal that started like a dream. Indeed, dreams do come true. I will start with my doctoral program advisor, Dr. Claudette Peterson, whose unwavering support and confidence in my abilities have bolstered me when most needed. Her shared commitment to students thriving and adult education have been invaluable in shaping my identity as a scholar. She assisted me in any way possible through this journey and was there for me every step of the way in supervising this disquisition. I am also incredibly grateful to Dr. Florin Salajan who has been a fantastic supervisory committee member and a mentor. He was always willing to meet with me to discuss and provide valuable feedbacks throughout all the stages of this work. Dr. Salajan's knowledge of qualitative research method and methodology was instrumental in my methodology selection for this study. In addition to Dr. Peterson and Dr. Salajan, I have had the great joy of working with two other incredible faculties on my committee – Dr. Myron Eighmy and Dr. Ashley Baggett. Their insights and perspectives have been integral to the development, implementation, and presentation of this body of research as well. In fact, it was during Dr. Eighmy's capstone class that I first conceived the idea of carrying out this research on thriving. His erudite voice of wisdom and line of questions during our committee meetings always gave me something extra to think about; in the end, those questions and valuable insights made me and my work better. I will miss him in retirement. Dr. Baggett's contributions also made my doctoral dissertation journey enlightening and enjoyable. I will never forget during my capstone exam meeting in the summer; Dr. Baggett had just given birth a month prior, yet, she committed to being present at my capstone meeting and true to her words, she was present in the meeting despite having a young child. Overall, I want you all my supervisory committee to know that I have the utmost respect and admiration for you. I will miss our time and integrations together.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to all the Education Doctoral Program (EDP) faculty members at NDSU. I have never experienced such caring and intelligent scholars who are committed and grounded in academics. They impacted me and increased my passion and desire for wanting to learn more to become a better scholar. I miss the knowledge of Dr. Roumell who later left the EDP department for Texas A&M. I am incredibly grateful to all the staff of NDSU Graduate Center for Writers – especially Kristina Caton. It was truly amazing working with her. I am grateful to many friends and scholars who have either taken this journey before me or who are taking it with me now, all of whom have provided unwavering support, insight, perspective, compassion, and motivation for finishing this work. I am grateful for my interview participants who shared their personal experiences and perceptions about thriving. I hope that you all know I am deeply thankful for all your input. I also wish to thank Dr. Dan Cernusca in the School of Pharmacy at NDSU. I have been honored to know and work with you as a graduate assistant over the past two years – you taught me a lot, provided flexibility for me, and encouraged me every step of the way.

Finally, I wish to thank my family. To my wife, Esther – you took care of the kids and the home while I was out many nights pursuing this goal. To my treasured heritage young children: Spencer, Elina, and Ephraim – this journey has been for you, though it might not have felt like it – I want you guys to know, me accomplishing this dream is an indication that your future is bright and you guys can accomplish yours as you guys grow older. To my mom and siblings – you all have prayed and supported me. To my younger brother Osayande-Isreal now pursuing his masters– You are my man, I continue to feel your support and words saying very soon I will finish, yes, my doctoral journey is now finished, although my quest for knowledge will not end with this degree. Finally, to God almighty who supersedes all things. You provided me the

strength to undergo this journey, you held and answered my prayers when it seemed I was helpless. You made the impossible become possible for me, THANK YOU, GOD!

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## CHAPTER 1. SITUATING THE ISSUES

A long-standing challenge confronting doctoral education in America and other parts of the world is the high rate of doctoral student attrition (Lovitts, 2001). Attrition, a phenomenon in doctoral education, describes the circumstances of graduate students who depart their respective doctoral programs without completion (Bair & Haworth, 1999; Wulff & Austin, 2004).

Approximately, half of doctoral students across all disciplines never complete their doctoral programs (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Gardner, 2009, Lovitts, 2001,).

A similar fate also occurs in the field of education, where attrition of education doctoral students is estimated to be around 50% or more (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Nettles & Millett, 2006). Within this estimate, about 25% of the doctoral students who do leave, depart during the dissertation and writing stage of their program (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992). This situation can be very painful and costly, given the enormous resources invested into the process both by the departing student and by the institution of higher learning (Golde & Walker, 2006). As stated by Gardner (2009), many who depart from their doctoral programs do not leave on a positive note; they often leave feeling as “failures” (p. 3). This feeling of failure was noted in an earlier study by Lovitts (2001), who stated that it takes almost a lifetime for departed doctoral students to recover from such feelings of unachieved ambition.

The literature on doctoral student reveals multiple factors contribute to this phenomenon of attrition (Lovitts, 2001). One reason often stated in the literature is the difficulty many doctoral students experience in the transition process from taking course work to carrying out independent research effectively (Lovitts, 2005). Independent research is the vehicle in which doctoral students exhibit intellectual craftsmanship and display their mastery of knowledge as potential scholars (Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, & Hutchings, 2008). As noted by Wisker,

Robinson, Trafford, and Warnes (2002), carrying out research is perceived as a form of learning and discovering. Gardner (2008a) also thought the transition to independent research is an inherent and fundamental element of doctoral education processes. Both researchers and students agree that the transition to independent researcher is the hardest part of doctoral education for many graduate students (Gardner, 2008a; Lovitts, 2008, 2005).

Furthermore, while discussing the challenges of learning transitions in doctoral students, Lovitts (2005) stated that doctoral students are typically admitted into doctoral programs because they have been good course takers. In contrast, beyond the coursework, the Ph.D. degree is awarded based on contribution to knowledge through new, original research. As doctoral students emerge from learning what others know to demonstrating their knowledge through independent research (Wisker, Robinson, Trafford, Creighton, & Warnes, 2003), they become part of the research community (Lovitts, 2005). However, many graduate students feel their graduate coursework did not prepare them adequately enough to undertake this all-important transition to independent researchers (Golde & Dore, 2001). In addition, faculty members interviewed in the Lovitts (2005) study also concede that this transition is difficult for many graduate students. Earlier, Labaree (2003) also stated that preparing researchers is a difficult process, both for those providing the preparation and for those receiving it. Golde and Dore (2001) carried out an extensive survey on doctoral students' experiences in doctoral education and found that many graduate students expressed similar concerns about their inadequate preparation to conduct independent research.

However, despite some doctoral students finding this transition to independent researchers to be difficult, with some going so far as to quitting their doctoral programs, the good news is that 50% of doctoral students do also thrive in their doctoral research experiences and

become effective independent scholars (Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2001). How do we make meanings of the experiences of these doctoral students who thrives? The understanding of some of the enabling and lived experiences that impact education doctoral students and graduates who thrive during the transition to independent researchers, and how they interpret and make sense of their experiences of thriving is the underlying interest guiding this research study. In addition, multiple conceptions from the literature on the phenomenon of thriving and the theory of well-being developed by Seligman (2011) was reviewed to provide the conceptual and theoretical framework for approaching the study. This framework was used to develop the research questions. Similarly, data analysis was organized and analyzed by research questions to draw together all the relevant aspects of the study, as well as focus on the phenomenon of thriving. To properly investigate how education doctoral students and graduates perceive the experience of thriving during the transition to independent researchers, it is appropriate to lay a foundation and understand some of the definitions and conceptions regarding the inquiry of thriving.

### **Definitions of Thriving**

Thriving, which indicate the functioning process of doing well and developing in the right trajectory, will be used in this current research study to represent positive students functioning in educational engagements. Thriving, a theoretical construct that describes positive functioning and behavioral response is defined in the literature from multiple perspectives (Benson & Scales, 2009). It establishes a connection between “positive psychology and the goals of [student accomplishments in] higher education” (Schreiner, 2013, p. 41). In this sense, thriving entails developing and utilizing positive psychological elements to achieve positive outcomes in the higher education experience.

In addition, thriving as a construct is associated with research on flourishing and psychological aspects of well-being that predicts retention and student engagement from the perspective of positive approach to education (Schreiner, 2013; Seligman, 2011). In other words, thriving promotes student positive outcomes and retention in a broader sense (Benson & Scales, 2009). Thriving also emphasizes not just surviving in higher education, but doing well as a holistic person (Schreiner, 2013). Therefore, the construct of thriving is selected in this study as a theme to explore education doctoral students' and graduates' positive outcomes, as well as retention for its broad emphasis on positive human functioning and meaningful development in doctoral education context. As noted by Rude (2016), by conducting research that focuses on students' thriving and retention, researchers and policymakers are better informed on the experiences and elements that foster student growth and positive outcomes.

One definition of thriving includes Schreiner's (2013) description of thriving as the holistic process of student positive outcomes in higher education that entails deep intellectual, social, and emotional engagement in the educational experience. Schreiner (2013) argued that in the higher education context, thriving goes beyond grades, coursework completion, and graduation. This definition suggests students who thrive in the higher education context experience immense multiple facets of engagement in the learning process (Schreiner, 2013). In other words, there is a profound relationship between multiple aspects of engagement and student thriving (Schreiner, 2013). Schreiner (2013) added that while the typical standards of good grades, coursework completion, and graduation are relevant to complete college, these components alone limit and miss significant portions of student experience that detail the scope of positive learning engagement in the educational context. Therefore, she asserts, thriving is to be "fully engaged intellectually, socially, and emotionally" in the educational experiences

(Schreiner, 2013, p.4). Furthermore, Schreiner (2013) suggests that students who thrive are not only academically accomplished by getting good grades, they are also productively engaged in their learning context through their motivation, deep thinking, and investment of time and efforts in the learning process. Thriving students also absorb information meaningfully, connect purposefully with others, and experience a high level of psychological well-being that contributes to the student's persistence and positive outcomes in the higher education experience.

Schreiner's (2013) assertions, though presented in the context of undergraduate students, can be likened to doctoral students, because past academic accomplishments (the first-year academic performance or completion of coursework) is observed in the literature as an inadequate measure of student's positive outcome in doctoral education context (Lovitts, 2001). While engagement in the doctoral learning context might be different from that of the undergraduate, because of the peculiar nature of adult learners (Knowles, 1984), Schreiner's (2013) suggestion of intellectual, social, and emotional engagement offers insight as to how graduate students can thrive. Furthermore, the definition of thriving provided by Schreiner's (2013) collaborates with aspects of positive psychology well-being theory, as articulated by Seligman (2011). Why then, is little or nothing documented about how doctoral students thrive and the processes that shape their lived experiences of thriving in doctoral education? This current study hopes to fill that gap and provide detailed knowledge on the influences that shape education doctoral students and graduates experiences of thriving during the transition to independent researchers.

In addition, thriving is defined as the application of strength- based approaches to engaging life situations (Clifton & Harter, 2003). For example, thriving can be described in terms of learning a new skill, or going through a challenging experience and adopting a



constructive attitude to deal with the challenge positively (Carver, 1998; Clifton & Harter, 2003; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). As noted by Clifton and Harter (2003), people can provide a near-perfect performance if personal talents and strengths are maximized. Therefore, the study of thriving is also important for education doctoral students and stakeholders to develop meaningful strategies for utilizing strength-oriented approaches in attaining positive outcomes in the doctoral learning context (Clifton & Harter, 2003). Building on these conceptualizations of thriving, this study perceives thriving as the process and experience of developing and applying positive characteristics to achieve positive outcomes in doctoral education learning contexts. This conceptual definition of thriving, drawn from multiple perspectives on thriving and the framework of positive psychology, argues that there are five elements of well-being that empower people to thrive: positive emotions, engagements, meanings, accomplishments, and positive relationships (Schreiner, 2013; Seligman, 2011).

In this current study, the five elements of well-being that enables thriving (positive emotions, engagements, meaning, accomplishments, and positive relationships) are visually represented in Figure 1. These five elements postulated by Seligman (2011) combined with multiple perspectives on thriving discussed in the literature review section were utilized to examine the perceptions of education doctoral students and graduates concerning their lived experiences of thriving during the transition to independent researchers. These five elements that enable thriving in the literature are important in exploring education doctoral students learning context as it contributes to the substantive knowledge of the various progressive aspects that can impact graduate student ability to thrive in their ontological circumstances (Seligman, 2011). In other words, these five elements and the perspectives in the literature contains a combination of positive characteristics that can influence education doctoral student experiences in their learning

context. However, though these five elements of wellbeing that enables thriving matters, they do not contain every nuance of thriving as there is no specific approach to thrive (Schreiner, 2013.). Notwithstanding, thriving in a holistic sense emphasizes the pathways and benefits of positive characteristics in approaching education and in this context education doctoral studies.



Figure 1. Five Components of Wellbeing that allows Thriving.

### Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

In the literature, the views pertaining to conceptual and theoretical frameworks are divergent (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012). While some scholars view conceptual and theoretical frameworks as separate terminologies, others perceived both terms as belonging to the same tenets and used interchangeably (Egbert & Sanden, 2014). Notwithstanding these arguments, Ravitch and Riggan (2012) suggested that the framework in a study is very significant to the foundation, sequence, rigor, and development of the research ideas and structure. They further emphasized that the framework is empirically relevant to establish a sound connection for the various ideas and choices linking the topic of research interest. Drawing from this perspective, a

framework for this study was developed to examine in-depth multiple concepts and descriptors of thriving in order to better understand the experiences and conditions that may facilitate thriving in education doctoral students and graduates' learning context. From the multiple perspectives on thriving derived from reviewing the literature and the theory of well-being (Seligman, 2011), the research questions were developed to investigate the overall premise of the study. In the same approach, data for the study was organized and analyzed according to the research questions.

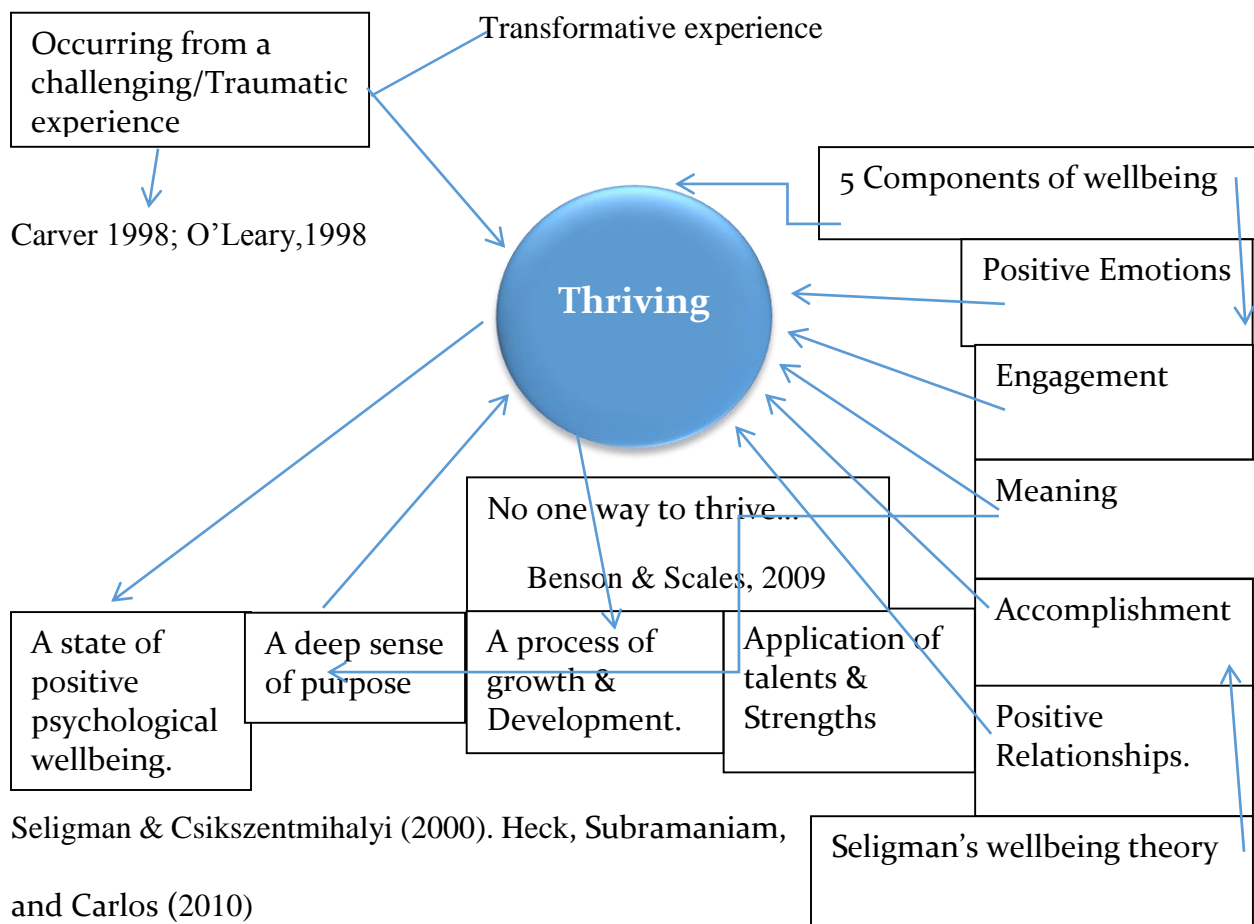


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework: Conceptions and wellbeing components of thriving derived from the literature. Developed proposed conceptual framework to explore the experiences of thriving.

## **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework developed for this study was derived from examining multiple scholarly perspectives in the literature that addresses the rudiments of thriving. Briefly restated, thriving is a multi-faceted construct that describes positive human functioning and development. It is defined in the literature from a variety of perspectives, as there is no one meaning or approach to thrive (Benson & Scales, 2009). For example, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) noted that thriving is a state of psychological well-being that allows people to function optimally and derive satisfaction with their life. This definition perceives thriving from a cognitive and affective domain of human functioning. In another perspective, Heck, et al. (2010) defined thriving as an intentional process of purposefulness and finding meaning across several of life domains, such as academic and social life. From this perspective, thriving connects with purposefulness and deep rationale for achieving something worthwhile (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003). Furthermore, although thriving is a positive phenomenon, thriving can also result from negative or transformative experience (Carver, 1998). This perspective associates thriving to positive adaptive or transformative experience. In addition, Bergland and Kirkevold (2001) explored thriving within a nursing home context in Norway, and described thriving as the process of an outcome of growth and development. Thus, thriving research is associated with how people positively evolve to become effective (Lerner & Overton, 2008). Lastly, Clifton & Harter (2003) conceived thriving as the utilization of strengths and talents to approach and engage life situations in order to achieve positive outcomes. These various conceptions of thriving are synthesized further and expanded in the literature review section of this study.

The emphasis of thriving is relevant in the education doctoral learning context, as it identified various interactions and experience that promotes graduate students' positive outcomes

in doctoral education. Given that there is no one way to thrive, the conceptual framework developed for this study draws on multiple conceptions describing thriving from the literature review structure and the well-being theory to guide the development of the research questions. In addition, the research questions were employed to provide the foundation for understanding and to describe the shared perceptions of how participants experience thriving in their research context, using a phenomenological methodology and interpretive analysis for in-depth reflection and writing to interpret the data and make meanings of participants lived experiences. More so, the idea of thriving through a combination of influences reflects the holistic nature of human interactions and how they positively navigate their everyday experiences. As noted by Consoli, Llamas, Cabrera, Noriega, and Gonzalez (2014), thriving relates to several positive abilities and behaviors. These abilities are worth exploring to understand in-depth how education doctoral students and graduates experience thriving in their research context.

### **Theoretical Framework**

According to Kerlinger (1973), theories are interconnected definitions, propositions, and concepts that represent a perspective of a given phenomenon. They provide a lens for understanding the critical concepts and assumptions embedded in shared knowledge. Haight, Barba, Courts, and Tesh (2002) stated that theories integrate knowledge and provide useful explanations for understanding given events and empirical findings. For example, in qualitative research, theoretical frameworks provide a lens for examining problems, providing thick description, interpreting data, and formulating theories and ideas (Reeves, Albert, Kuper, & Hodges, 2008). In this current study, the theoretical perspectives of the well-being theory from the framework of positive psychology was used to examine the perceptions of education doctoral

students and graduates concerning their lived experiences of thriving during the transition to independent researchers.

The well-being theory was chosen as a theoretical lens to co-operationalize this study because it describes the combination of positive psychological components that promote effective functioning in human experiences (Seligman, 2011). The well-being theory also focuses on the applied knowledge and meanings that shape graduate students and graduates experience of thriving from a holistic perspective (Seligman, 2011). As noted by Huppert and So (2013), the relevance of exploring positive well-being as an indication of progress cannot be overstated. Therefore, positive well-being is associated with a wide range of positive outcomes: effective learning, productivity, competence and creativity, life satisfaction, engagement, healthy relationships, and pro-social behaviors (Huppert & So, 2013). Another reason for exploring the well-being theory in this study is that strong subjective and objective well-being indicates when adults are thriving, it is not because they are free of challenges in their everyday experience; rather, thriving involves the application of positive interventions and making appropriate meanings from challenging situations (Seligman, 2011). Hence, the significance of identifying and exploring positive characteristics and experience for education doctoral students' application in their learning context irrespective of the challenges underpin the choice of well-being theory in this study. The overall implication is that though well-being theory has not been extensively explored in the doctoral learning context, a focus on well-being theory and order aspects of thriving in doctoral education offers the potential for education doctoral students and stakeholders to promote positive initiatives that facilitate thriving in the graduate educational learning context.

## **The Well-being Theory**

The well-being theory is a theory in positive psychology that explores the positive aspects of human experience that enable individuals and communities to thrive. This theory was developed by Seligman (2011), a positive psychologist. According to the well-being theory, the capacity to discover, experience, and apply the unique combination of positive emotions and signature strengths is fundamental to humans thriving (Seligman, 2011). Positive emotions are the positive affective feelings that help to cultivate psychological growth and improve well-being over time (Fredrickson, 2001). This perspective also suggests that when people experience positive emotions, such as joy, interest, hope, creativity, optimism, and excitement, it prompts them to engage with their environment or situational context positively (Fredrickson, 2001). Simultaneously, signature strengths are positive characteristics and strong virtues sets that are uniquely manifested in the individual (Clifton & Harter, 2003). Some researchers at the Gallup organization argue that the discovery and application of natural and developed abilities are the greatest opportunities to thrive (Clifton & Harter, 2003). Building on the assumptions of positive emotions and signature strengths, the theoretical perspective on psychological well-being theory utilized for this study suggests that there are five components of well-being: positive emotions, engagement, meaning, accomplishments, and positive relationships. These components allow humans to thrive and attain a meaningful life of satisfaction. These five components will be briefly summarized below.

### **Positive Emotions**

Human behavior and attitude suggest that creating positive emotional connections with the learning process is more effective than creating negative patterns since “learning is a process of mental inquiry” (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2012, p. 34). In other words, positive feelings

foster many dimensions of positive outcomes in the learning process (Seligman, 2011). Similarly, emotions are cognitive expressions perceived as an integral process of adult learning experiences (Dirkx, 2001). One approach to creating effective emotional connections for people to thrive in their experiences is by engendering positive emotions (Seligman, 2011) because humans are shaped and influenced through the lens of emotional experiences (Shuck, Albornoz, & Winberg, 2013). Furthermore, positive emotions like warmth, enthusiasm, happiness, love, passion, and pleasure that people experience and express are documented as fundamental dispositions that play significant roles in human positive functioning, cognitive processing, and learning experiences (Dirkx, 2001; Seligman, 2011). For example, a traumatized doctoral student in a state of distress is less likely to concentrate or connect with learning activities (Shuck et al., 2013). In contrast, positive emotions can facilitate student's awareness and explorative thoughts towards learning transitions since a positive outcome elicits a positive response (Schreiner, Louis, & Nelson, 2012). In addition, positive emotion can foster affirmative epistemological outlook that in turn shapes a student learning outcome (Schreiner et al., 2012). Besides, with positive emotion, academic challenges could be approached with positive initiative, resilience, and determination (Schreiner et al., 2012). In the doctoral education context, positive emotion is not an area of extensive research. However, scholars observed emotion is an integral part of doctoral student's experiences since emotions are implicated in all human behaviors, responses, and interactions (Dirkx, 2008). As noted by Cotterall (2009), positive emotions facilitate doctoral students' motivational capacity to persist in the graduate school experience.

### **Engagement**

The second construct in the theoretical conceptualization of thriving in this study is engagement. Seligman (2011) describes engagement as being immersed, productive, and



utilizing strengths and talents to achieve intended goals. It is, to be “completely absorbed in the task” (p. 16) at hand. This definition suggests thriving in the given context requires immense involvement in the given process, leading to a bonding experience where people completely embed themselves in the project at hand (Seligman, 2011). Schreiner (2013) regarded this process of engagement as the investment of quality time and effort to achieve desired educational goals. Seligman (2011) expanded the process of engagement to be all about “flow” (p. 11). Flow is a mental process, wherein an individual fully participates during a given activity by assessing the energy and applying strengths and talents to learn and to meet the stated objectives. Seligman (2011) suggested that to achieve flow, engagement is required at the highest level of human experience to realize persons who are fully functioning using their strengths. Furthermore, engagement is a multifaceted phenomenon that can occur in a variety of dimensions, both physically and psychologically, positively and negatively.

In the literature, engagement is also linked to student involvement theory (Astin, 1999). According to the student involvement theory, the greater the student involvement, the richer the learning and personal development that lead to academic triumph (Astin, 1999). Positive psychology also supports this perspective that the greater the involvement, the more likely healthy mastery of skills are attained for positive outcomes (Seligman, 2011). In regard to doctoral education context, there is evidence that graduate student engagement also holds many benefits (Gardner & Barnes, 2007). For instance, in a study conducted on doctoral students’ engagement and involvement, Gardner & Barnes (2007) reported that engagement leads to better learning outcomes and the integration into the learning community of doctoral students. In contrast, doctoral students who experience disengagement from doctoral studies are less likely to

persist, and may not also develop the necessary competencies to thrive in graduate school (Vekkaila, Pyhältö, & Lonka, 2013).

## **Meaning**

The third aspect of the well-being theory that enables people to thrive is meaning. According to Seligman (2011), human beings want meaning and purpose in life. Meaning consists of the desire for a sense of direction, understanding, and belonging to something bigger in life (Seligman, 2011) – in other words, attaching oneself to something significant and finding the essence of life. In addition, meaning is described in the literature as the ability to find value in life or one's given context (Seligman, 2011). It is a central concept of motivation that defines the rationale behind what people do (actions), and their cognitive reasoning and functioning (Frankl, 1959). Damon et al. (2003) noted that life is all about finding meanings, and to thrive, people should learn to see life as meaningful and profound irrespective of their circumstance. Frankl (1959) also noted that the search for meaning should be the primary source of motivation for living a life that thrives. In doctoral education, meaning making is associated with having a deep sense of purpose because the process of intellectual learning is strongly influenced by the meanings participants derived from their learning experience (Ignelzi, 2000). Meaning making also helps doctoral students construct and explore their identities to determine how valuable the doctoral journey constitutes a transformational experience (Walker et al., 2008). As noted by Cotterall (2009), no matter what one does, the significance of meaning making cannot be overlooked. Furthermore, from a constructivist perspective, each person has the capacity to create their meanings to address their needs, and a focus on finding meaning can be a significant protocol for thriving in the doctoral learning experience (Ignelzi, 2000).

## **Accomplishments**

According to Seligman (2011), people who thrive are absorbed in what they do, working towards a deep sense of fulfillment by achievement. Differently worded, they live the “achieving life” (Seligman, 2011, p. 20). The achieving life describes the sense of pride people feel when they are engaged in an activity for its own sake. Seligman (2011) also stated that accomplishment describes what people choose to do in order to thrive, whether mastering a skill, engaging in an activity of passion, or simply winning a contest; the mere participation in an activity of interest fulfills a need of satisfaction that leads to the feeling of accomplishment (Seligman, 2011). Therefore, the urge to have accomplishments contributes to the ability to thrive (Seligman, 2011). Furthermore, Seligman (2011) articulated that achievement is highly linked to effort. Effort is equated to how much time is invested in practicing specific task, because “spending more time on the task will build achievement” (Seligman, 2011, pp. 124-125). In addition, Seligman (2011) postulated that time invested on task leads to greater achievements, multiplies skills, as well as increased knowledge.

In the doctoral education learning context, people seek a doctoral degree for a variety of reasons in order to be accomplished and to fulfill intrinsic and/or extrinsic needs (Rossman, Muchnick, & Benak, 2015). However, the urge for the doctoral study accomplishment, if not backed by deep learning commitments, could result in a superficial doctoral learning experience (Rossman et al., 2015). Notwithstanding, Seligman’s (2011) description of accomplishments rests on the onus that the urge to thrive in its own right can propel people to thrive as they focus on their goals for further accomplishments.

## **Positive Relationships**

The last component of the well-being theory is positive relationship. Again, Seligman (2011) notes that “very little that is positive is solitary”; therefore, the influence of positive people in one’s life matters (p. 20). He continues that all “high points in life... took place around other people” (p. 20). Since loneliness is a disabling and alienating condition, the pursuit of key relationships and human connection is fundamental to well-being (Seligman, 2011). In research on thriving, relationships and human connections have been identified as key components (Haight et al., 2002; Schreiner, 2013). For example, Schreiner (2013) noted that thriving is incomplete without relationships. Haight et al. (2002) stated that people affect people and as such, throughout the lifespan there is a constant interaction between people and their environments. Therefore, the people in one’s life can be barriers to or enablers of thriving. Robert Kegan (1982) in his book, *The Evolving Self: Problems and process in human development*, presented the idea of positive relationships within the context of the holding environment, wherein, he promotes the idea that personality developments occur in the circle of nurturing relationships of human interactions. Similarly, the literature attests that in the doctoral education environment, the levels of relationships and sense of social connection that exists for graduate students can facilitate doctoral student thriving (Gardner, 2009). For example, the relationships between doctoral students and faculty or other graduate students can affect thriving.

Relying on these various ideas on the well-being theory and the literature, this study was developed to increase the knowledge on the processes of experiencing thriving in the doctoral education context, specifically, the experience of thriving of education doctoral students in the transition to independent research roles. In doctoral education, thriving as a paradigm in the graduate school experience has not been extensively researched and documented.

Notwithstanding, there are strong indications that many doctoral students do thrive in their graduate school learning experiences. In addition, thriving as a theoretical construct is significant because it offers paths to understanding the role of positive initiatives to address the challenges doctoral students experience in their doctoral education process (Gardner, 2008a). Thus, a study of this nature can help doctoral students, In addition, it may help policy makers to develop and adopt proactive initiatives for experiencing thriving during the transition to independent research roles. In other words, this knowledge can help doctoral students thrive and function optimally as they embark in the graduate school learning experience. As noted by Benson & Scales (2009), thriving is an under-utilized construct that adds value to theory, research and application.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The path towards Ph.D. completion is like a road less traveled because of mass attrition (Gardner, 2008b). In 2010 for instance, only 9% of Americans age 25 and older were reported to have held an advanced degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). In doctoral education, half of the students who begin their graduate education never complete it before departing (Lovitts, 2001). This situation, known as attrition, is considered one of the major challenges in doctoral education (Lovitts, 2001; Wulff & Austine, 2004). According to Gardner (2008b), concerns about high attrition rates in doctoral education have resulted in multiple research studies and initiatives. In one such study, Lovitts (2001), through interview with students and faculty members, found that many doctoral students do not complete their studies because of the difficult transition process to independent researchers. In addition, students reported the transition to independent research roles as problematic, because after the coursework doctoral education becomes more individualized (Gardner, 2008a). Individualized, in this sense, suggests that the nature of doctoral education is such that students transition from

consumers of knowledge through experiences in the classroom to creators of knowledge through independent research (Gardner, 2008a). During this individualized process, doctoral students are implicitly expected to make the crucial transition to independent researchers on their own; this is difficult for many graduate students (Lovitts, 2005). Hence, there is great interest in doctoral research on the difficulty many graduate students encounter and how to positively handle this difficulty during the transition to independent researchers (Gardner, 2008a; Lovitts, 2005, 2008). Because, while many graduate students find the transition to independent research difficult, on the other hand, some students thrive as they navigate the independent research process. To echo Barbara Lovitts (2005), the Ph.D. is awarded for effectively undertaking independent research as a graduate student. It “marks the transition from student to independent research scholar” (Lovitts, 2005, p. 138).

Thus, this study is developed to gain a better understanding of what allows education doctoral students and graduates in two Midwest universities in United States thrive as they navigate the transition to independent researchers, given that effective transition is a fundamental part of doctoral education (Gardner, 2008a). This knowledge is significant in order to articulate ways to improve doctoral education completion rates. It is also vital in order to advance the knowledge that enhances education doctoral students’ abilities to thrive from the onset of their doctoral studies through the application and positive response to the experience of transitioning to independent researchers. Therefore, through exploring the literature and the lens of positive psychology well-being theory, this study reviewed the multidisciplinary literature on the construct of thriving. In addition, education doctoral students and graduates who are perceived to experience thriving in their research context was interviewed to explore their perceptions concerning their experiences of thriving as they transitioned to independent researchers.

## **Purpose of the Study**

For many doctoral students, the transition to independent research roles is particularly difficult (Gardner, 2008a). However, the Ph.D. is awarded for creatively conducting independent research (Lovitts, 2005). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine education doctoral students' and graduates' perceptions concerning their experiences of thriving during the transition to independent researchers in doctoral education. Thriving is defined in this study as the process and experience of developing and applying positive characteristics to achieve positive outcomes. I utilized scholarly ideas from the literature review section and the theory of well-being by Seligman (2011) to develop the conceptual and theoretical framework, as well as guide the development of the research questions. In addition, through a semi-structured open-ended interview process and other data sources, I employed a phenomenology methodology and interpretive perspective as lens for understanding, interpretation, and analysis of the data from research participants.

## **Central Research Questions**

The central research question guiding this study is: What are the experiences that allows education doctoral students and graduates to thrive as they navigate the transition to independent researchers?

## **Other Research Questions**

The following sub-research questions framed the current study:

1. What are education doctoral students' and graduates' experiences as they transition from being students to independent researchers?
2. What was the influence of their relationships and acquaintances during the transition to independent researchers?

3. How, if any, have they experienced moments of transformation during the transition to independent researchers?
4. How have they utilized their natural talents and personal strengths during the transition to independent researchers?

### **Significance of the Study**

In higher education, it is extremely crucial to envisage how doctoral students will thrive in their learning experiences given the high rate of attrition in doctoral programs. Consequently, previous research estimates that approximately 50% of doctoral students do not complete their studies due to variety of reasons, from this 50%, about 25% of doctoral students who do leave, depart their graduate studies after coursework (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992). One reason for attrition mentioned in the literature is the difficulty experienced by many doctoral students during their transition to independent researchers (Lovitts, 2008). Therefore, this proposed study is particularly significant to current and future doctoral students as they embark on their doctoral education journey, because this study examines education doctoral students and graduates positive experiences of thriving during the transition to independent research roles. In addition, the knowledge that research participants shared about what helped them thrive and their lived experiences will be helpful for understanding the transition to independent researcher roles in doctoral education. These perceptions, interventions, and approaches to research that was shared by the study participants are important given that adults, for the most part, learn from their experiences and the experiences of others (Knowles, 1984). Moreover, doctoral education policy makers will benefit from this study as they formulate initiatives that articulate how doctoral students can thrive in general.



Building on the perceptions and experiences of education doctoral students and graduates who have experienced thriving in their research roles, this study through interpretive descriptive analysis addressed what positive experience facilitates doctoral students' transitions to independent researcher roles in education doctoral program. Likewise, the positive experiences and trajectories that lead to education graduate students' effective transitions to independent researcher was comprehensively addressed. Furthermore, the multiple conceptions of thriving that details positive based approaches of humans functioning according to positive psychology was used to discuss themes, perspectives, and implications for theory and practice in doctoral education. In summary, understanding ways education doctoral students and graduates positively navigate the independent researcher's process is beneficial in the effort to increase student persistence and accomplishment in graduate education. Conclusively, my intent as a researcher in carrying out this inquiry is to bring a deeper and fresh perspective into the conversation concerning the demands of education doctoral student thriving and the holistic factors that lead to the experience of thriving in the face of an ongoing attrition challenges in doctoral programs.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Attrition:* The departure from and non-completion of the doctorate program.

*Doctoral Students:* Graduate students pursuing a doctorate degree.

*Doctoral Candidate:* A doctoral student who has completed the comprehensive exam.

*The Ph.D. and Ed.D:* Doctoral degrees.

*Thriving:* The process and experience of developing and applying positive characteristics to achieve positive outcomes.

### **Delimitations**

This study is not conducted in all the universities offering education doctoral programs in the United States.

1. Despite the uniqueness of this study, it was conducted only within one single discipline, that being doctoral education.
2. The study only covers the perspectives and reflections of research participants in education doctoral discipline.
3. Participants' responses are subjective and limited to personal experiences and interpretations. By subjective, it is meant that the personal feelings and observations are singular to the particular participant rather than a third-party opinion.

### **Limitations**

This study was carefully designed to explore the perceptions of education doctoral students and graduates concerning their experiences of thriving during the transition to independent researchers. Some of the identified study limitations includes:

1. This study is limited to education doctoral students who are doctoral candidates that have completed all requirements for the doctorate degree except dissertation (ABDs), or who have graduated from a doctoral education program within the last two years.
2. During the process of responding to interview questions some participants may forget or omit some relevant information during their explanation. This may leave crucial information relevant for understanding the studied phenomenon out of the research study.

3. The study focused on the positive experiences that allow participants to thrive; it does not represent what led to possible failures of other graduate students in education or students who do not experience thriving in their learning context.
4. Although not intended, as a result of the subjective nature of qualitative research, the researcher's subjective views may implicitly impact the research during data analysis. However, I took caution to guide against my subjectivity and attempt to remain objective throughout all the stages of this study.
5. Data obtained from the study may be exposed to different interpretations by diverse readers and audiences.

Chapter Two reviews the literature that addresses the nature of doctoral education and the context of doctoral students as they embark on their graduate school journeys. Chapter Two also discussed the literature on the theoretical lens of thriving to gain a better understanding of the various definitions and conditions that can facilitate thriving in the education doctoral learning context. Lastly, Chapter Two concludes by examining the literature that establishes a connection between conducting independent research as doctoral students and applying strengths-based approaches to thriving during the transition to independent researchers.

## **CHAPTER 2. THE LITERATURE REVIEW**

The focus on doctoral education and the preparation of education doctoral students to thrive during the transition to independent researcher roles guided the literature search in this section. Similarly, this literature review described the landscape of doctoral education, followed by a review of some major issues in doctoral education, the nature of the transition to independent researchers in doctoral education, the theoretical lens of thriving and adapting a strength-based approach to conducting independent research. From the literature review selection, the study conceptual framework was developed.

### **The Landscape of Doctoral Education**

The Council of Graduate Schools (2005) defined doctoral education as an academic program that prepare students to become scholars who will discover, integrate, apply, and disseminate knowledge. In this sense, doctoral students are trained to develop the capabilities and skills to conduct scientific inquiries and communicate the findings through diverse scholarly approaches (Boyer, 1990). Golde and Walker (2006) expanded this concept to say that doctoral education prepares graduate students to develop certain habits of the mind and acquire appropriate skills to become experts in a topic area. In other words, the doctorate develops scholars who will manifest creativity, independence in critical thought, and the ability to develop and investigate incisive questions about an issue of interest (Golde & Walker, 2006).

Consequently, since the award of the first doctorate degree by Yale University in 1861, doctoral education in America, by many measures, is a tale of monumental accomplishments of an increasing melting pot of global intellectual exploration (Golde & Walker, 2006). Notwithstanding, it is also an educational enterprise filled with many challenges, demands, and contemporary pursuits (Walker et al., 2008). Central to this quest as described by both students

and doctoral education stakeholders, is an understanding of what doctoral education entails and its purposes (Golde & Dore, 2001). In addition, these stakeholders also express the need to understand how to effectively prepare students to become scholars and leaders of industries outside academia (Golde & Dore, 2001).

Furthermore, the literature defines doctoral education from many perspectives, including those of developing scholars who conduct research, teach, and lead in the industries (Gardner, Hayes, & Neider, 2007). Also, in the effort to improve understanding of doctoral education, Walker et al. (2008) reported in the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate (CID), that doctoral education can be conceptualized in four major dimensions:

1. Doctoral education as a preparation field for scholars
2. Doctoral education as a series of milestones through participation in intellectual learning community
3. Doctoral education as preparation platform for stewards of the discipline, and
4. Doctoral education as scholarly apprenticeship.

### **Doctoral Education as a Preparatory Field for Scholars**

According to Walker et al. (2008), doctoral education is a set of experiences that prepares scholars who, (1) “understand what is known and (2) discover what is not yet known” (p. ix). It is the foundation upon which global higher education is built. Therefore, doctoral education describes the professional preparation doctoral students are engaged in as they become lifelong learners and intellectual actors who promote knowledge in all its ramifications (Lovitts, 2008). Walker et al. (2008) also believe doctoral education prepares thinkers and scholars to embark on “academic adventures” (p. ix). These adventurous undertakings entail the various creative activities of scholarship and research that contribute to knowledge (Lovitts, 2005). Particularly,

doctoral programs with Ph.D. emphasis prepare students to gain a wide variety of research skills and specific competencies through fervent exploration of knowledge (Walker et al., 2008). For instance, in addition to completing coursework in doctoral programs, students are required to complete a research dissertation, which marks the transition from knowledge dependency as graduate students to independent thinkers and contributors to knowledge as scholars (Lovitts, 2005).

### **Doctoral Education as a Series of Milestones**

Doctoral education exists for the fundamental purpose of helping graduate students develop core skills, so they can function effectively in their learning communities and in society in general. In addition, doctoral education cumulates in a series of landmarks doctoral students must achieve if they are to realize the goal of becoming doctorate degree holders (Walker et al., 2008). The milestones, and their required expectations, enable doctoral students to become productive; they gain new skills, knowledge, and the intellectual disposition to thrive as new scholars (Walker et al., 2008). The milestones include “course taking, comprehensive exams, approval of the dissertation prospectus, the research and writing of the dissertation” (Walker et al., 2008, p. 10). Gardner (2009), situated the series of milestones in doctoral education into three stages. These stages are (1) the entry stage, (2) the integration stage, and (3) the candidacy stage.

#### ***Entry Stage of Doctoral Education***

The entry stage of doctoral education begins as a student develops knowledge and awareness about doctoral programs, is admitted, attends graduate orientation, establishes initial contact with peers and faculty members, begins course work and experiences the shift from undergraduate education to graduate school expectations (Gardner, 2009). During this initial transition time, doctoral students experience multiple, complex challenges to their identities

(Gardner, 2009). Some examples of these challenges include possible moving to a new location, experiencing a new culture, and navigating the demands of life and graduate school (Gardner, 2009). These encounters begin a series of milestones and transitions doctoral students experience in graduate school (Gardner, 2009). In this regard, the entry stage involves learning how to balance the various facets of the doctoral journey, making commitments, developing academic skills in reading and writing, and learning to think independently while analyzing course materials and moving forward intellectually (Gardner, 2009).

### ***Integration Stage of Doctoral Education***

In the second stage of doctoral education, students experience what Gardner (2009) describe as “integration” (Gardner, 2009, p. 61). During this phase of the doctoral program, students’ complete coursework that will enable them to establish competency in subject matter, as well as prepare for examinations. Although, doctoral students commence coursework in stage one, in stage two, students continue to substantiate their cognitive, intellectual, and epistemological development through coursework (Gardner, 2009). It is also in this stage that students explore knowledge in their discipline and understand the expectations for thriving in doctoral education. In addition, students develop bonds with peers and faculty advisors, experience a shift from being knowledge dependent to knowledge producers (Lovitts, 2005). They also master tangible skills, such as learning to conduct research and interpret its related findings (Gardner, 2009). Thus, as students’ progress, they advance to become doctoral candidates following the completion of their comprehensive exam process (Gardner, 2009). Their comprehensive exams serve as an educational goal that qualifies them for doctoral candidacy and provides profound learning opportunities in the process (Walker et al., 2008).

### *Candidacy Stage of Doctoral Education*

In the final stage of doctoral education, also known as the candidacy stage, described by Gardner (2009), students advance to independent research roles to complete their doctoral dissertations and define their professional paths after passing the comprehensive exams. Lovitts (2008) stated that effective completion of the dissertation signifies the transition from a student to a research scholar. Fundamentally, the Ph.D. is granted by most doctoral institutions for completing independent research that contributes to disciplinary knowledge (Lovitts, 2005). Unfortunately, the candidacy stage in graduate education is the most difficult stage for many doctoral students, because transitioning to an independent research role requires sufficient preparation in research skills, self-direction, self-efficacy, and motivation (Gardner, 2009). Sadly, these requirements can prove to be challenging for many graduate students (Gardner, 2009).

Furthermore, students expect continuous and helpful feedback from their programs advisors (Gardner, 2009). In many cases, there is a disconnect between feedback expectation and feedback reception, which leads to isolation (Gardner, 2009). Regardless of the specific situation, the literature on doctoral education observes that the assistance students receive throughout the entire process is pivotal to student thriving and persisting in the educational experience (Walker et al., 2008). Mainly, the supportive role of the faculty mentor or advisor becomes important in helping the student develop the necessary skills to complete the dissertation (Gardner, 2009). As noted, doctoral students who are lucky enough in their doctoral journey to have graduate advisers that are inspiring know how essential the effective collaboration with faculty mentor contributes to how they thrive personally (Walker et al., 2008). In conclusion, the three stages of doctoral



education as detailed by Gardner (2009) summarize the series of milestones that culminate in the completion of doctoral education.

### **Doctoral Education: Preparing Stewards of the Discipline**

Doctoral education is also viewed as an intellectual enterprise dedicated to educating and preparing scholars to promote and preserve disciplinary inquiry (Golde & Walker, 2006). These scholars are known as stewards of the disciplines (Golde & Walker, 2006). In addition, Colbeck (2007) claimed that stewards in the doctoral education context should be trained in such a manner that they can creatively generate new knowledge, conserve valuable information and useful ideas, and responsibly transform understanding in the academic community and the society at large. From this perspective, stewards are involved in developing competencies of skills, gaining disciplinary knowledge, and learning principles and obligations that guide stewardship (Colbeck, 2007). In this sense, doctoral students who are being prepared to become stewards learn scholarship developed around understanding a discipline, mastery of the literature, and research skills in the area (Ullrich, Dumanis, Evans, Jeannotte, Leonard, Rozzi, Taylor, Gale, Kanwal, Maguire-Zeiss, Wolfe, & Forcelli, 2014).

Additionally, Golde and Walker (2006) discussed in depth what the preparation of disciplinary stewards might entail. From the analysis they provided through their essays on the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate, a multiyear research project in the United States that focused on “aligning the purpose and practices of doctoral education in six disciplines” (mathematics, chemistry, neuroscience, history, education and English) (Golde & Walker, 2006, p. 6), doctoral education, broadly speaking, is the preparation of the next disciplinary leaders (graduate students) as the future stewards of the discipline, who will creatively generate new knowledge and communicate that understanding through writing, teaching, and application.

Consequently, the development of doctoral students to become stewards of the discipline becomes a core mission of doctoral education (Golde & Walker, 2006).

Furthermore, Walker et al. (2008) described stewards in doctoral education as those who are entrusted with the responsibility to generate, conserve, and transform knowledge for the continuity of the discipline and the betterment of the society. This notion of stewards generating, conserving, and transforming knowledge can be said to be applicable since doctoral education in a way is a “reproductive model” (Walker et al., 2008, p. 90); in other words, it is a system of education that regenerates itself by producing new scholars and stewards (Walker et al., 2008). Underscoring this argument is the notion that stewards are involved in developing competencies and skills in the discipline (Colbeck, 2007). Hence, Walker et al. (2008) believe a fully developed steward and scholar should be capable of generating and critically evaluating new knowledge in the discipline.

The idea of generating new knowledge stems from the fundamental understanding that doctorate holders, especially Ph.D. recipients, should be able to conduct research (Walker et al., 2008). This means that they should be able to design scientific projects that address critical questions, develop strategies for investigating the questions, and report the results of the investigation in a clear, compelling, and erudite manner (Walker et al., 2008). In addition, this research should advance and add to knowledge in the discipline in a significant way (Walker et al., 2008). More so, in another dimension, Golde and Walker (2006) earlier fostered the idea that to attain the obligation of becoming stewards of the discipline, doctoral students should be trained in three critical areas: generating, conserving, and transforming knowledge.

### ***Generating Knowledge***

The generation of knowledge is the ability to conduct credible research that adds to knowledge and address specific challenges (Golde & Walker, 2006). This is part and parcel of the doctoral education process, especially in the Ph.D. experience, for which students typically are required to carry out research for a dissertation (Gardner, 2008a). As noted by Lovitts (2005), the Ph.D. as an academic degree is granted for effectively completing independent research and contributing to knowledge. This process makes the transition from being a consumer of knowledge to a producer of knowledge (Lovitts, 2005). Thus, conducting intellectual inquiries to discover the unknown is at the heart of generating knowledge in doctoral education (Golde & Walker, 2006).

### ***Conserving Knowledge***

The conservation of knowledge is the fundamental responsibility for maintaining the continuity, stability, and vitality of the field (Golde & Walker, 2006). For example, as disciplines evolve, stewards have the obligation to learn the various paradigms and theories that shape the intellectual landscape of the discipline; that way, stewards understand knowledge in the discipline and how such knowledge functions in the field (Golde & Walker, 2006). In addition, stewards should also understand the historical perspectives of the field and use that foundational knowledge to promote current practices, while at the same time exploring areas that require improvement (Golde & Walker, 2006).

### ***Transforming Knowledge***

According to Golde and Walker (2006), the transformation of knowledge represents how ideas are communicated to make an impact. Another way we could look at it is the transmission of knowledge that speaks clearly to others in a meaningful manner (Golde & Walker, 2006).

They noted that knowledge, understanding, and insights have little meaning by themselves except when such ideas are communicated clearly and effectively. Earlier, Boyer (1990) echoed a similar dictum by stating the work of the scholar becomes consequential only as it is understood by others (p. 24). From this perspective, the transformation of knowledge underscores the relevance of communicating ideas effectively and clearly, in the broadest sense, to create meaning and impact (Golde & Walker, 2006). Moreover, regardless of work settings and career destination, stewards must be able to convey information across populations and organizational environments (Colbeck, 2007). Thus, the preparation of doctoral students to become stewards of their disciplines through doctoral education presents the unique lived experience and opportunity for developing communication skills, be they oral or written (Golde & Walker, 2006).

### **Doctoral Education as Scholarly Apprenticeship**

According to Shulman (2005), understanding a profession requires studying its preparation and training process. Similarly, doctoral education is a unique process that results in an “optimum learning” experience (Golde & Walker, 2006, p. 141). Central to this understanding is the idea that a doctoral student in the process of becoming a scholar learns from a faculty mentor, a process described in the literature as an apprenticeship (Nerad, 2012). In this sense, doctoral education involves an intellectual and personal development process that entails training and tutelage of individuals in one-to-one settings between students and faculty mentors (Walker et al., 2008). Hence, the scholarly apprenticeship model is stated in the literature to be an excellent approach to doctoral education when effectively implemented, producing enduring personal and professional relationships (Walker et al., 2008). On the downside, if the relationship between the student and advisor is poor, it can lead to the loss of the student’s intellectual

passion, and possibly, to the student's attrition (Walker et al., 2008). Therefore, Walker et al. (2008) recommended that apprenticeship in doctoral education should be reconsidered both as a learning theory and as a set of practices that inform and strengthen all aspects of doctoral education.

Furthermore, apprenticeship in doctoral education is also described as an "apprenticeship in the art of discovery" (Golde & Walker, 2006, p. 141). It consists of the process wherein a doctoral student is prepared and mentored by a faculty member to become a scholar and steward of the discipline. This definition of apprenticeship seems to focus on intellectual and research skill development and as such, it describes how doctoral students are trained to demonstrate creativity and independence in critical thinking and conducting credible research through the art of discovery (Lovitts, 2005). Furthermore, conceptualizing doctoral education through the apprenticeship lens is integral to understanding education at the highest level (Golde, 2007). This apprenticeship lens aligns with the purpose of doctoral education as outlined by the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate (CID; Golde & Walker, 2006). The CID states that the purpose of doctoral education is to educate and prepare those who can be entrusted with the vigor, quality, and integrity of the field (Golde & Walker, 2006).

Though doctoral education is conceived through an apprenticeship lens, Golde and Walker (2006) emphasized that the apprenticeship model of education functions optimally when there is a strong student motivation to learn coupled with an informed and inspired faculty mentor who guides the intellectual process. This perspective also aligns with positive psychology, which argues that students' attitudes toward learning play a significant role in thriving in higher education (Seligman, 2011). In addition, although the apprenticeship process in doctoral education is directed by faculty members, the effectiveness of this model is

demonstrated best with a highly-motivated student (Walker et al., 2008). From this perspective, an effective, professional relationship between faculty adviser and graduate student cannot be underestimated; it is essential in the formation and realization of a thriving graduate education enterprise (Walker et al., 2008).

Furthermore, while the apprenticeship model of doctoral education is the most widespread approach in graduate education and often perceived as the typical model in many doctoral programs, some scholars question the view that it is the sole effective model in doctoral education (Flores-Scott & Nerad, 2012). One criticism of the apprenticeship model as the sole possibility is that it tends to foster a reproductive system of mentoring, which limits creativity and promotes “intellectual conformity” (Walker et al., 2008, p. 90). It also hinders the development of students’ independent voices and intellectual lines of thoughts (Flores-Scott & Nerad, 2012). Another criticism is that the apprenticeship model also encourages over-dependency on faculty mentors, which may lead to the exploitation of students. When this happens faculty leaders may be reluctant to intervene (Walker et al., 2008).

In addition, some researchers also argue that the apprenticeship model limits opportunities for learning models that reflect students’ preparation and their diverse learning communities (Nerad, 2012). These researchers argue this because doctoral students experience learning through a “series of learning communities that operate at multiple levels inside and outside the university” (Nerad, 2012, p. 58). Put differently, doctoral students learning is best captured through the lens of multiple learning approaches (Flores-Scott & Nerad, 2012). Some examples of learning approaches that can reflect student preparation and development in doctoral programs are peer learning (Flores-Scott & Nerad, 2012), journal clubs (Golde, 2007), and signature pedagogies (Shulman, 2005).

## ***Peer Learning***

Flores-Scott & Nerad (2012) stated that peers are a unique force in every doctoral learning program, yet there is little empirical research on the role of peers in doctoral education. However, there are studies that support the idea that peer learning can contribute to doctoral students' development as they transition to independent research scholars and members of the academic community. As noted by Gardner (2007), doctoral students can provide psychological and intellectual learning experiences for one another when the intellectual process becomes isolating. Consequently, peer learning is understood as a reciprocity model of a "learning partner" (Flores-Scott & Nerad, 2012, p. 74) relationship in doctoral education. In this sense, doctoral students socialize and learn the values, skills, and norms of their discipline or field from each another. Peer learning can also be described as a collaborative learning process (Boud & Lee, 2005). Though different from the undergraduate context, peer learning at the graduate student level surrounds adults working together to foster personal development (Boud & Lee, 2005). Two known approaches of peer learning are the use of student cohorts or cohort-based programs and peer mentoring programs (Flores-Scott & Nerad, 2012).

Student cohorts are organized group of students who enter a program simultaneously and experience similar graduate learning (Flores-Scott & Nerad, 2012). Also, student cohorts are believed to influence the learning process and can provide opportunities for student support that enhances learning. For example, students in a cohort may attend lectures together, develop study groups, and provide academic support to each other (Flores-Scott & Nerad, 2012).

Peer mentoring is another initiative that provides learning opportunities for graduate students. In this approach a more senior student with experience is paired with a less experienced student. The experienced mentors can communicate personal experiences about navigating the

graduate program, share how they coped with hardships, and suggest strategies for success (Flores-Scott & Nerad, 2012).

### ***Journal Clubs***

Typically, journal clubs are reading groups; although found primarily in the sciences disciplines, journal clubs are mentioned in the literature as an essential component of learning in doctoral education (Walker et al., 2008). They provide a platform for scholarly exchange and learning for both students and faculty members. Similarly, Golde (2007) defined journal clubs as “formally organized reading groups that discuss an academic article found in the recent research journals” (p. 345). They usually meet frequently to discuss specific area of research interests and are understood to be effective for structured and unstructured teaching and learning in the graduate education experience (Golde, 2007). They ensure faculty members and graduate students meet to get abreast of the current literature in the discipline and also provide a forum for collective efforts to promote awareness of contemporary research findings (Golde, 2007). In addition, graduate students can learn writing styles and scholarly conversations. Furthermore, they can practice the critique and appraisal of research and model the unique practices of their intellectual learning community through participation (Walker et al., 2008). Moreover, the idea of journal clubs in learning activities has a long history. For example, in the early history of adult education in America, Benjamin Franklin established the “Junto,” a group of liked-minded adult professionals who engaged in learning and discussion for a common purpose (Dillon, 2009). In all, journal clubs are noted in the academic literature to foster the learning and collaboration imperative for emerging scholars during their doctoral education experience (Walker et al., 2008).



## *Signature Pedagogy*

The apprenticeship model is also described in the literature as “the signature pedagogy of doctoral education” (Flores-Scott & Nerad, 2012, p, 73). This idea stems from the belief that much of the teaching and learning that takes place in doctoral education occurs in a one-to one interaction between the student and the faculty mentor (Golde & Walker,2006). In a broader sense, signature pedagogy describes the various forms of teaching and learning doctoral students receive in their preparation for professional roles (Shulman, 2005). Shulman (2005) defines signature pedagogies as types of teaching and learning that mirror the fundamental ways future scholars are prepared and educated for new professional roles. These roles include how to think as a scholar, how to perform scholarly roles successfully, and how to act with integrity as a steward of the discipline (Shulman, 2005). Golde (2007) later noted that signature pedagogies are not just intellectually compelling; they are comprehensive approaches across disciplines that meet pedagogical purposes. Signature pedagogies also contribute to socializing students into “disciplinary norms and identities” (Golde, 2007, p. 345). Therefore, there is great value in developing signature pedagogies for implementation in doctoral education at departmental levels (Golde, 2007). Shulman (2005) elaborated on the idea of signature pedagogies and stated that they comprise three critical aspects of professional work: a) how to think, b) how to perform, and c) how to act with integrity. These three aspects of professional work in the doctoral enterprise can be summed up by what Walker et al., (2008) regard as the development of “the scholar[ly] professional identity in all its dimension[s]” (p. 8). It is in the development of this “scholarly professional identity” that doctoral students learn both the canon of scholarship and the cutting-edge research in order to function in the discipline (Boyer, 1990). Having this knowledge is

extremely significant in understanding, undertaking, and preparing doctoral students to become independent thinkers and scholars (Golde, 2007).

### **Some Major Issues in Doctoral Education**

The challenges that affect doctoral education both as experienced by graduate students and on the institutional level are identified in the literature to persist on several issues (Walker et al., 2008). While some of the challenges are long-standing and well known, others continue to emerge (Walker et al., 2008). For example, the literature on doctoral education mentioned that there is a mismatch between academic preparation and career opportunities as many students complain graduate education did not adequately prepare them for full professional roles both in academia and outside of academe (Golde & Dore, 2001). In a similar perspective, Golde and Walker (2006) who collaborated on multiple year research projects (the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate (CID) and the Advancement of Teaching project) stated there are growing concerns on how well doctoral programs are serving the development of their students and their preparation for research and professional positions.

In other instances, there are dwindling academic jobs after doctoral training, resulting in the unemployment of many Ph.D. holders (Gilbert, 1996), thereby questioning the relevance of the doctorate if students can't secure jobs that match their preparation and professional interest (Gilbert, 1996). As noted by Gilbert (1996), the Ph.D. job crisis has been with us for a long time. Even the brief boom in the 1980s could not bring a job to every new Ph.D. or those who lost jobs during the collapse of the 1970s. She further analyzed the situation by suggesting the broadening of the scope of graduate student's preparation to include academic and non-academic specializations in order to enhance the scope of employment prospects for doctoral students (Gilbert, 1996).

In addition to these challenges, public investments in higher education continue to experience cuts in many areas (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). As such, many doctoral students often struggle with inadequate financial support and funding to collaborate with experienced faculty members on research projects (McCarty & Ortloff, 2004). There is also the challenge of navigating the adviser and advisee relationship in doctoral education (Barnes, 2010). The most concerning issue in graduate education is that half of the doctoral students who begin graduate school experience attrition for various reasons (Lovitts, 2001). Within the attrition numbers of doctoral students, a vast portion of the doctoral students who drop out of graduate school do so during the transition to the independent research and dissertation writing processes (Lovitts, 2008). This experience, scholars believe, can be detrimental and costly both to the individual student and to the institution (Gardner, 2009; Golde & Walker, 2006; Lovitts, 2001). However, despite these issues, some doctoral students still persist and do well in their doctoral learning experience (Lovitts, 2001) – for example, doctoral students who effectively carry out their research dissertation, a major landmark in doctoral education (Lovitts, 2005). As stated before, the underlying characteristics and lived experience of education doctoral students and graduates who thrive in the transition to independent research role is of interest in this current study.

### **The Nature of the Transition to Independent Researcher in Doctoral Education**

An integral aspect of doctoral education is the transition experience of graduate students who evolve from students to become independent thinkers and scholars (Gardner, 2008a). This transition experience is noted in the literature as being “part and parcel of the doctoral education process” (Gardner, 2008a, p. 326). However, the nature of the transition to independent researchers in doctoral studies can be a difficult process for many doctoral students because of individual and institutional nuances (Gardner, 2008a). It is also difficult because the transition to

new professional and academic roles, including independent research, requires the development of new skills and habits of inquiry to adapt and embrace new learning domains (Baker & Pifer, 2011). Consequently, doctoral students at this stage of intellectual integration are expected to make the critical shift from being consumers and dependents of knowledge, where students, for example, receive lectures, reading lists, and specified assignments to become independent creators and producers of knowledge (Lovitts, 2005). This transition of intellectual integration can become an arduous process for many doctoral students who in some circumstance feel they have not been prepared adequately for such critical and independent transitions (Golde & Dore, 2001).

In addition, coming from a different educational background or prior intellectual socialization and disciplinary context can also present a challenge that makes the transition to independent research overwhelming for many graduate students (Gardner, 2008a). For example, Labaree (2003) noted that experiencing the transition from a practice-oriented background, like teaching, to become a researcher may create potential epistemological and cultural conflicts about how knowledge is perceived and practiced in the discipline of education. He, therefore suggested, making the transition from being a teacher to a researcher calls for potential changes in the approach of how knowledge in education and the work of educationists are appraised (Labaree, 2003). Disciplinary culture and organizational structure may also contribute to the difficult transition many students may experience as discipline practices often vary (Gardner, 2008a). For example, Gardner (2008a) noted that a scholar from the sciences will typically work collaboratively with other scholars and experience research from the onset of their graduate education. In the arts, humanities, and education, students after a lengthy period of focusing on coursework, are required to work independently on their own during the transition to research

protocols (Gardner, 2008a). In retrospect, this expectation has a great isolating effect on some doctoral student's successful transition to the independent research processes (Gardner, 2008a). Finally, the research dissertation that culminates the transition to independence of graduate students to scholars equally presents intellectual challenges as many graduate students found this aspect of the transition to independence to be extremely difficult (Gardner, 2008a), particularly in disciplines where the dissertation project is implicitly set up to be carried out in isolation with little or no institutional support (Gardner, 2008a).

The challenges and the difficulties many graduate students experience in the transition to the independent research processes are beneficial to academic development. The literature has observed that this transition plays an inherent part in graduate school experience (Gardner, 2009; Schreiner et al., 2012). Therefore, making the most of the transition experiences and developing effective strategies to thrive during episodes of transitions in graduate school are essential to graduate students (Gardner, 2009). Likewise, effective strategies, positive interventions, and experience provide a solid foundation for graduate students to thrive and persist in their educational experience (Schreiner et al., 2012). This idea of applying effective strategies and positive interventions during processes of transition in graduate school informed the choice of the well-being theory utilized as theoretical framework in this study (Seligman, 2011).

Consequently, transition is described as "any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006, p. 33). It is part of every graduate student's educational experience and determines a student's decision-making ability and available resources for thriving (Schreiner et al., 2012). As such, the nature of transitions requires positive behavioral response and adaptation during transition experiences in the graduate school (Gardner, 2009). As noted by Goodman, Schlossberg, &

Anderson (2006), transitions have three stages or processes, (1) moving in; i.e. moving into a new situation or environment (2) moving through (the situation) and; (3) moving out (response strategy) (Gardner, 2009). For instance, when graduate students are admitted into doctoral programs, which is perceived as a new context, they need to learn the norms, rules, conventions, and expectations governing their context (Gardner, 2009). Once in this situation, doctoral students learn to balance their activities to move through the transition effectively (Goodman et al., 2006).

Similarly, Schreiner et al. (2012) identifies three elements for effective transition: a) positive cognitive appraisal, when a student perceives the transition as a positive experience that provides the opportunity for growth and the student believes they have potential to thrive and benefit from the transition experience, b) a strong support system, where a student is surrounded with the information, resources, feedback, and people they need to sustain their energy and motivation through the change process of the transition, c) development of effective strategies, where a student is equipped with positive coping strategies for dealing with the events that occur during the transition experience.

For doctoral students in particular, transition experience in the doctoral program can be both exciting and overwhelming, depending on the student's motivation and the level of support available to them (Gardner, 2009). Notwithstanding, Schreiner et al. (2012) noted that a student's ability to effectively navigate transitions in higher education is of greater benefit. The transition in higher education can be a positive experience that develops student's well-being to its fullest (Schreiner et al., 2012). On the other hand, the transition can also result in a negative experience that shatters confidence and results in disengagement from the environment if the proper response strategy is not adapted (Schreiner et al., 2012). Notwithstanding, all transitions typically

involve change, and the moment a person experiences change, a stress reaction is experienced (Gardner, 2009). The key to thriving or not thriving in such circumstances is how positively or negatively the stress is perceived by the cognitive appraisal of the individual (Schreiner et al., 2012). According to Dweck (2006), when students experience transition and perceive it positively, they are more likely to grow and develop positive coping skills, seek out information, support networks, and invest time in acquiring the best from the transition experience.

Furthermore, a student's perception, control, and support system are extremely fundamental during the transition process (Schreiner et al., 2012). Schreiner et al. (2012) concluded their analysis of students' transition in higher education by stating that effective transitions have five distinguishing characteristics: 1) students perceive transition as positive opportunities for growth (individual perception), 2) Students use healthy coping skills during the transitional task, rather than avoid the transition (adopt positive coping strategy), 3) students believe they have the support they need to move through the transition (appropriate support system), 4) students access resources during the process of transition for relevant information and support (finding and engaging resources), and 5) students emerge from the transition by growing in significant ways (growing and moving forward). These ideas for thriving in transition can also be applicable in the doctoral education context (Gardner, 2009).

Considering the characteristics of transitions mentioned in the literature, the connections between what may help doctoral students thrive as they evolve to become independent research scholars is summarized to include: personal perceptions, positive coping strategies, appropriate support system, finding and engaging resources, and growing in the right direction intellectually (Schreiner et al., 2012). In this sense the construct of thriving, with its broad focus on positive human functioning and development, offers a conceptual and theoretical approach for education

doctoral students as they navigate their educational context using positive approaches. In addition, given that transitions are an inherent part of graduate education (Gardner, 2009), thriving provides useful insights that allows education doctoral students to effectively navigate, persist, and complete the transition to independent researchers as emerging scholars (Schreiner, 2013). Therefore, adapting positive characteristics would be useful in the transition experiences of education doctoral students. The construct of thriving in this regard details the fundamental insights for navigating and experiencing higher education in a meaningful sense following effective transitions (Schreiner, 2013).

### **The Lens of Thriving**

#### **Background to Thriving Research**

As previously mentioned, thriving is a multi-faceted construct that describes positive human functioning and development from different contexts (Benson & Scales, 2009). It describes the dynamic process of functioning and adapting well in given contexts (Benson & Scales, 2009). From this approach, thriving is influenced by several individual and social factors (O’Leary & Ickovics, 1995; Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005). In addition, thriving may be identified in behavioral, cognitive, and adversary experience that foster growth in the right direction (O’Leary & Ickovics, 1995). As an area of empirical research, thriving gained its roots in the medical field, when Holt (1920) wrote a milestone publication titled, *The diseases of infancy and childhood*. In this book, Holt (1920) described the observation of growth and development of infants as vital practice in early detection of abnormalities in infants and toddlers. Over time, the abnormalities that indicates a child failure to grow at the normal or expected rate became known as the *failure to thrive* syndrome. Furthermore, in the early 20th century, medical professionals began to frequently use the term failure to thrive to



describe inadequate growth or malfunction in infants and older adults (Kagan & Gall, 1998; Lobo, Barnard, & Coombs, 1992). Failure to thrive in infants implies deficient development, and in adults implies loss or decline in physical and cognitive growth. For example, Newbern and Krowchuk (1994) analyzed failure to thrive as it relates to older adults and found the following attributes associated with failure to thrive: disconnectedness, inability to give of oneself, inability to find meaning in life, weight loss, depression, and the decline in cognitive function. As the years went by, medical researchers and social scientists broadened their scope beyond exploring the failure to thrive syndrome, which focused on human deficits and negative outcomes, to the positive concept of thriving (Haight, Barba, Courts, & Tesh, 2002). As stated by Ickovics and Pack (1998), focusing on thriving represents a paradigm shift from disease related attention to focusing on positive healthy outcomes and abilities. In other words, while failure to thrive focuses on insufficient growth and development in humans, thriving emphasizes growth and development in the right direction of individuals and communities in several domains such as academics, well-being, and social relations (Benson & Scales, 2009).

Contemporarily, thriving is an emerging area of inquiry by researchers and scholars in the medical sciences, behavioral and development sciences, social sciences, positive psychology, and higher education. It focuses on healthy psychological wellbeing, positive human functioning, and transformative life experiences that enable individuals and societies to thrive (Benson & Scales, 2009; Kegan, 1982; Schreiner, 2013; Seligman, 2011). For example, one of the core missions of the positive psychology movement as described in the theoretical framework of this study (well-being theory) is to focus on positive attributes and outcomes for understanding the psychology of what empowers individuals and communities to thrive (Seligman, 2011). Thus,

thriving is conceptualized from many areas of strengths and positive human functioning (Benson & Scales, 2009).

In the context of doctoral education, thriving as a paradigm in the graduate school experience has not been extensively researched. Notwithstanding, there are strong indications that many doctoral students do thrive in their graduate school learning experience. How do we phenomenologically make meanings from these experiences? Because by making sense of these experiences and understanding the positive behavioral responses and healthy strategies that enable them to thrive, we can aid more doctoral students to thrive in their academic experience. Thus, meaningful experiences, positive behavioral responses, and healthy strategies employed by individuals who thrive in their context are the focus of research on thriving (Benson & Scales, 2009; Ryff, 1989; Schreiner, 2013). Furthermore, thriving as a theoretical construct is significant as it offers paths to understanding the role of positive-based initiatives, behaviors, and meaningful experiences in addressing the challenges doctoral students may be confronted with in graduate education (Gardner, 2008b). Thriving also underscores the holistic experiences that capture student accomplishment and persistence in the higher education context from a broader perspective (Schreiner, 2013). Hence, thriving as a theoretical construct matters to education doctoral students as it enhances and provides insights into those individual and collective well-being characteristics and strengths that promotes desirable achievement in educational context (Ryff, 1989). As noted by Seligman (2011), thriving is not the absence of challenges, rather it is the presence of positive virtues and strengths. In addition, when people thrive, they experience a sense of progress and momentum, while at the same time learning and developing in a positive direction (Spreitzer et al., 2005).

Additionally, thriving as a multi-faceted construct is used in the literature to describe many aspects of positive characteristics and outcomes (Benson & Scales, 2009); however, thriving, as a positive paradigm, as mentioned in some studies in the literature may occur from negative or traumatic experience (Carver, 1998; O’Leary, 1998). In other words, traumatic and challenging experiences can trigger a sense of thriving (Carver, 1998). For example, Thomas and Hall (2008) conducted a qualitative study of some females who experienced abuse as children, but thrived as adults after those traumatic experiences as children. Thus, thriving is linked with adversarial growth, hardiness, and resilience in the situational context (O’Leary, 1998). In other words, thriving is experienced as a result of positive psychological and adaptive responses to difficult life events (Carver, 1998; Spreitzer et al., 2005). In addition, thriving can be transformative in nature because of the positive cognitive mental shift that can occur in challenging circumstances (Carver, 1998). This transformation leads to the experience of thriving when the individual becomes better off after the traumatic experience. However, it is unclear from the literature whether certain psychological aspects of thriving after trauma are innate or learned (Thomas & Hall, 2008). Nevertheless, challenging experiences and setbacks are identified as turning points for thriving (O’Leary, 1998).

### ***Adversarial Growth***

One school of thought holds that adversarial growth is a stress-related growth or phenomenon (Linley & Joseph, 2004). In other words, thriving is a phenomenon that emerges following a challenging or traumatic experience. The thriving entity becomes transformed because it evolves through the traumatic experience (Carver, 1998; Lerner, 2008; Ryff, 1989). This perspective describes thriving as transformative in nature in that the traumatic or challenging experience serves as the individual catalyst for growth (Caver, 1998). In this

instance, the thriving person or entity emerges in a better psychological state of well-being after the crisis (Linley & Joseph, 2004). This idea stemmed from the postulation that when an individual experience a difficult situation, a new response reaction emerges, and that response can either be positive or negative (Gardner, 2009). A positive response results in adversarial growth, which is conceptualized in the literature as thriving (Carver, 1998). Benson and Scales (2009) agreed with this perspective by stating that thriving persons seem to emerge in the face of adversity. In this instance, the thriving individual becomes optimally equipped from the experience to better deal with the situation or similar situation in the future (Benson & Scales, 2009).

Furthermore, the adversarial growth perspective of thriving is closely associated with constructs like posttraumatic growth, positive adjustment, positive adaptation, positive coping, problem focus solving, positive reinterpretations of life events, optimism, and learned resourcefulness (Linley & Joseph, 2004). This perspective also states that through the process of experiencing traumatic or challenging events, positive changes may emerge that push the individual to a higher level of functioning; this is what is regarded as thriving (Linley & Joseph, 2004).

In comparison, in the literature doctoral education is often regarded as a “complex process of formation” because of the many difficulties doctoral students might experience in the process of becoming stewards and scholars (Walker et al., 2008, p. 8). However, through the process of experiencing and engaging in the complexities of doctoral studies, the adversarial growth model maintains that doctoral students who respond affirmatively can experience positive changes that culminate in a higher level of functioning or a thriving experience. This knowledge about adversarial growth as a process of thriving in doctoral studies can help graduate

students think in terms of problem-solving when challenges do occur. Consequently, adversarial growth is necessary to navigate the transition to independent researcher because it provides an understanding of the growth potential in difficult circumstances (Gardner, 2009). This idea should also provide the foundation for furthering intellectual work and in engaging other life challenges that can result in thriving (Linley & Joseph, 2004).

### ***Hardiness***

A quick Google search for the term “hardiness” produces about 5,300,000 results; one such result defines hardiness as the ability to endure difficult conditions. In research and empirical perspectives, hardiness is associated with the characteristics that help individuals persevere in challenging life circumstances or environments (Benishek, Feldman, Shipon, Mecham, & Lopez, 2005). It is a term closely related to adversarial growth and is conceptualized as a combination of three healthy attitudes that transform stress-related events or circumstances into opportunities for thriving (Maddi, 2006). In other words, hardiness constitutes three healthy attitudes or characteristics: “commitment, control, and challenge” (Maddi, 2006, p. 161). Also, it refers to the functioning lifestyle of involvement in one’s context, irrespective of the circumstance, in contrast to the individual’s choice to withdraw, isolate, or disengage (Maddi, 2006). In the educational context, commitment is described as the willingness to put forth sustained efforts to excel in learning (Benishek et al., 2005). These perspectives of commitments through involvements are similar to the concept of engagement in the psychological well-being theory used in the literature, which asserts that engagement leads to a state of total absorption in the process of success (Seligman, 2011). The other hardiness attribute is control which is the ability to take charge and influence the course of events in one’s life in a positive direction (Maddi, 2006). Challenge, involves a sense of viewing life experiences as opportunities for

learning and development (Maddi, 2006). These three attitudes are observed to predict and produce a healthy level of positive human functioning in challenging circumstances (Maddi, 2006). These three characteristics of hardiness foster the courage and motivation to be actively engaged in turning difficult circumstances into opportunities for growth necessary for thriving (Maddi, 2006).

From an academic point of view, positive psychologists proposed that students can apply the hardiness assumption to address life challenges and respond to academic work with behaviors and interventions that promote their ability to overcome academic difficulty (Benishek et al., 2005). Furthermore, the hardiness perspective sheds light on how students can perceive academic work as challenging puzzles to be worked at with commitment and control in order to thrive in a demanding educational environment or context (Hystad, Eid, Laberg, Johnsen, & Bartone, 2009).

### ***Resilience***

Resilience is described as the capacity to withstand stressful circumstances in an adaptive manner (Zautra, Hall, & Murray, 2010). Herrman, Stewart, Diaz-Granados, Berger, Jackson, & Yuen (2011) referred to resilience as a dynamic process of positive adaptation and the ability to maintain positive well-being despite challenging experiences. Bonanno, Westphal, and Mancini (2011) defined resilience as the ability for adults to maintain relatively stable psychological and physical healthy functioning levels in challenging and threatening events. In addition, resilience is associated with protective factors that contribute to what helps the individual deal with adverse situations (Herrman et al., 2011). Protective factors in this sense are positive coping mechanisms that contribute or influence people in managing challenges (Herrman et al., 2011). From this perspective, resilience occurs when there is significant exposure to adversity, and results in

positive functioning due to the protective factors (Herrman et al., 2011). However, though protective factors are some common terms for achieving resilience, some scholars believe that resilience can be achieved through personality traits, while others argue social systems and context can determine resilience (Herrman et al., 2011). From a broader picture, Herrman et al. (2011) noted there are multiple factors that can influence the process of developing resilience. While personality traits like internal locus of control, biological, positive cognitive appraisal, attitudinal dispositions, optimism, motivation, and self-efficacy can contribute to resilience, other factors such as environmental and social support systems can also enhance the capacity for resilience (Herrman et al., 2011).

Furthermore, in the literature, resilience is considered a significant human factor of well-being in that it allows individuals and communities to persist and thrive despite challenging situations (Carver, 1998). Thriving occurs with resilience when one can persist and make sense of the adversarial situation, and focus on the positive change and development that leads to a better functioning level afterward (O'Leary, 1998). Likewise, thriving individuals are resilient in the face of personal challenges (Schreiner, 2013). In addition, adversity and challenges can lead to resilience and bring about positive psychological outcomes, because the person who experiences thriving through resilience can function at a higher level even after the adverse events (Carver, 1998). Graduate education requires resilience to navigate the various aspects of doctoral learning for students to thrive.

### **Thriving as the Psychological Experience of Positive Well-being**

According to the views and framework of positive psychology, thriving is a positive state of psychological well-being that allows the individual or community to flourish (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Psychological wellbeing in this sense is the optimal functioning of

an individual, the life satisfaction, and the affective domain of humans that enables them to thrive (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). As mentioned before, Seligman (2011) asserted that there are five components of well-being that allow people to thrive: positive emotion, engagement, meaning, accomplishment, and positive relationships. Positive emotions are the affirmative cognitive thinking that people feel and express towards themselves and others. It is also described as the foundation of one's inner positive outlook about life (Schreiner, 2010). Engagement involves being productive and the deployment of strengths and talents to achieve intentional educational goals. Meaning is finding purpose in life, while accomplishment is a deep sense of fulfillment. Lastly, positive relationships entail significant connections with others (Seligman, 2011). Seligman (2011) concluded that no single element can solely determine well-being; rather, well-being is a combination of the subjective and objective phenomenon in life. Put differently, wellbeing describes feeling good, as well as having meaning, healthy relationships, and accomplishments that lead to fulfillment (Seligman, 2011). Consequently thriving, from the dimension of positive psychology, implies people with high levels of psychological well-being have strong possibilities to thrive because of the positive views they hold about life and their functioning circumstances (Schreiner, 2010). In contrast, people with low levels of wellbeing have little propensity to thrive (Bergland & Kirkevold, 2001). For instance, emotion, one of the vital components of well-being as acknowledged by Shuck et al. (2013), is a critical aspect of adult learning. Shuck et al. (2013) noted that emotions could either impede or stimulate learning. As an aspect of thriving, positive emotion towards the learning process can lead to the possibility of upward momentum and investment of effort into the learning context.



## **Thriving as a Deep Sense of Purpose**

The concept of thriving is also understood through the motivational lens of purposefulness (Heck et al., 2010). Purpose is an intrinsic concept of meaning that defines the rationale behind what people do (actions), their cognitive reasoning and functioning (thought process) (Damon et al., 2003). In this context, purpose is associated with finding meaning and essence in one's ontological reality (Damon et al., 2003). Similarly, the deeper the degree of purpose, the greater the sense of engagement and the higher the possibility of thriving (Schreiner, 2013). Schreiner (2013) further declared that people who thrive are driven by a deep sense of purpose because of their well-defined meaning of life and their goals. According to Schreiner (2013), for individuals to thrive, intent and mission must be clearly defined, articulated, and rooted in purpose. Damon et al. (2003) stated that life is meaningful, and that to thrive, people should learn to see life as profound irrespective of the circumstances. Consequently, Damon et al. (2003) maintained that the greatest responsibility for any individual is to find purpose in his or her life. One approach Damon et al. (2003) suggested for finding purpose in life is to undertake a challenging task or learn something new.

Furthermore, Heck et al. (2010) defined thriving as an intentional and purposeful development across several of life domains, such as academic, social, and/or professional, to achieve a definite purpose. From this perspective, thriving is also understood as a deliberate approach towards growing one's ontological reality (experience) in a positive fashion to facilitate self-improvement (Ryff, 1989). Furthermore, a deep sense of purpose is required to define one's mission or reality (Schreiner, 2013). Purpose is also said to be the perception of inner strength, the way people live, and the responsibility people ascribed towards why they live (Frankl, 1959). Purpose has also been described in the literature as the generalized intention to accomplish

something meaningful or worthwhile (Damon et al., 2003). A sense of purpose is like a guide that drives action towards fulfillment or success (Damon et al., 2003). From this assumption, without a deep sense of purpose, it is hard to imagine the cohesiveness needed to thrive (Perkins-Reed, 1996). In doctoral education, purpose is noted as the core moral obligation of stewards and scholars; it is recognized as a fundamental feature at the heart of engaging in intellectual work if one is to thrive as stewards and scholars of the discipline (Golde & Walker, 2006).

### **Thriving as a Process of Human Growth and Development**

Bailey (1976) noted that nothing is more significant in human experience than to grow and develop. This assertion is also consistent with Spreitzer and Porath's (2013) statement that once living creatures stop growing, they begin the process of dying. Therefore, from these assumptions, growth and development are very significant in the process toward a thriving human experience. Similarly, Spreitzer and Porath (2013) stated that to thrive individuals need to be growing psychologically, physically, and intellectually. This perspective suggests that thriving is an important process of human nature (Spreitzer & Porath, 2013). In this circumstance, the thriving individual experiences progress and momentum in the different aspects of life (Spreitzer et al., 2005). Similarly, Bergland & Kirkevold (2001) states that thriving is a process of growth and development. Their perspective conforms with Ryff's (1989) assertion that thriving is a continuous growing process of becoming, rather than a fixed state of affairs in life. Furthermore, Spreitzer et al. (2005) claimed that when people thrive, they experience a sense of learning, and vitality that leads to personal and intellectual growth. From these assumptions, thriving is a generative process of continuous human growth and development. In addition, Lerner and Overton (2008) postulated that thriving as a process of development describes how people positively evolve throughout their lifespans, because when

individuals thrive, they grow in significant ways that reflect enhanced self-knowledge and effectiveness (Ryff, 1989). An example of this significant growth is the evolving process that describes doctoral students' development from being novice researchers to successful independent researchers (Gardner, 2009).

Furthermore, growth and development as features of thriving also describe the process of improvement along an optimal positive direction (Benson & Scales, 2009). An example of this improvement is the process that describes doctoral students' development from being novice researchers to effective independent research scholars (Gardner, 2009). Within doctoral education contexts, thriving doctoral students grow and develop throughout the process of their doctoral journey. As doctoral students take coursework and seek disciplinary knowledge and skills, they learn new ideas and discover new perspectives that foster their intellectual growth and development (Walker et al., 2008). As stated by Gardner (2009, p. 7), "despite the lack of literature attesting to it, doctoral students do of course develop." This perspective echoes Erikson's (1959) view that in the theory of development, individuals move through stages of growth and development to progress to the next level, and this process extends throughout their lifespan.

In conclusion, the concept of growth and development as processes that facilitate thriving also brings into focus the essential role of the human mindset towards thriving (Dweck, 2006). Dweck (2006) noted that the perspective individuals adopt for themselves profoundly affects whether or not they thrive. For instance, if one assumes intelligence is unchangeable in the learning context and that knowledge is fixed (what Dweck conceptualized as a fixed mindset), it is difficult for such an individual to grow and develop intellectually because of the assumed mindset (Dweck, 2006). Conversely, if intelligence is assumed to be cultivated, and developed

over time with passion and training (what Dweck conceptualized as the growth mindset), then the individual's character can be developed to create a deep passion for learning (Dweck, 2006). Thus, growth and development, as processes to thrive, begin with a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006). Given that the mind is the greatest human element and as such, what people think profoundly impacts how they grow and develop their potential (Dweck, 2006). Put differently, thoughts precede actions (Dweck, 2006). As observed by Covey (1996), everything happens twice, once in the mind and then in reality. A growth mindset is ingrained in the maxim that intelligence is not fixed, rather, it is a dynamic process that is developed over time (Dweck, 2006). The growth mindset also predisposes students to strive for improvement through dedicated efforts and learning (Aditomo, 2015).

In the doctoral education context, this is known as the fluid process of identity development, in which a doctoral student evolves through learning dispositions and practical applications (Gardner, 2009). Dweck (2006) noted that similarly, when human actions are undertaken from this perspective, thriving improves competency, positive behavior, and the ability to grow and develop in the right direction. In addition, the growth mindset also ensures students strive for new knowledge and adaptive skills in their context to achieve better outcomes through improvement. Thus, people with the growth mindset will thrive because they stretch themselves and become resilient). To reiterate, the mindset is the individual's strongest asset for growth and development in thriving. Although all other measures like the community, environment, and human interactions may also aid an individual's opportunity to thrive, the development of a person is ultimately a process shaped by the mindset the person possess. Some steps Dweck put forward towards developing the growth mindset include continuous learning,

realizing hard work is the key to thriving, and facing setbacks with hardiness and perseverance. Overall, Dweck (2006) believed that learning is more significant than grades in education.

### **The Transition to Independent Researcher: A Strength-based Conception of Thriving**

Over the last several decades, the focus on doctoral student persistence and accomplishment towards completing a research dissertation has increased (Gardner, 2009). In particular, since many doctoral students find the transition to independent research difficult, leading to attrition in some instances (Lovitts, 2001), examining how doctoral students thrive becomes a major undertaking in order to advance graduate student development and educational accomplishment (Gardner, 2009). In addition, the behavioral dispositions, skills, and character strengths applied by doctoral students who thrive become essential in contemplating the transition to independent research roles (Schreiner et al., 2012).

An emerging approach many scholars and researchers are exploring is the utilization of talents and strengths as the impetus for adult student learning, intellectual development, and academic accomplishment (Louis, 2011). Therefore, this current research study views a strengths-based approach as a creative lens that can help doctoral students make the critical transition to independent researchers (Gardner, 2009). This is significant given that doctoral students, although adults, are still students who can learn to build on their strengths to achieve excellence (Clifton & Harter, 2003). Consequently, the strengths-based approach to education is discussed in the concluding section of this literature review.

### **Strengths-based Approach to Education**

Scholars active in various aspects of educational, organizational, and human development research recognize that the utilization and focus on talents and strengths are significant factors in positive humans developing and thriving (Clifton & Harter, 2003; Schreiner, 2004). For

example, positive psychology, a science that focuses on what helps people and communities thrive, argues that when individuals operate from a position of strength, they are more likely to reach their optimal potentials (Clifton & Harter, 2003). Consequently, according to positive psychology, talents are the natural recurring patterns of thoughts, feelings and behaviors that aid productivity and excellence (Clifton & Harter, 2003). In addition, strengths are developed characteristics that help people perform well in their given contexts (Schreiner, 2004). Again, according to positive psychology, each individual is empowered with sets of talents (natural abilities) and strengths (developed abilities) to function optimally in their particular contexts (Fredrickson, 2001). This understanding articulates the strength-based approach to education on the assumption that the identification, development, and application of strengths results to thriving in the higher education experience (Schreiner, 2013). In other words, capitalizing on one's strengths and positive characteristics results in a higher level of functioning (Lopez & Louis, 2009). In addition, the strength-based approach to education argues for a learning process that focuses on the axiom that when graduate students identify, develop, and apply their strengths, the results are positive (Lopez & Louis, 2009). This perspective also emphasizes that students in educational contexts will maximize their skills to address educational challenges and complexities when strengths are utilized as an operational model (Lopez & Louis, 2009). As noted by Clifton and Harter (2003), people who act on their strengths are more likely to flourish.

Similarly, doctoral students can apply this strength-based approach to education in order to thrive in the transition to independent research processes (Lovitts, 2008). For example, creativity is a factor in the process of conducting independent research in doctoral education (Lovitts, 2008). In this regard, doctoral students utilizing the strengths paradigm learn how to become aware and apply the strengths of their creativity in navigating the transition to

independent researchers, since creativity is a social phenomenon that “involves judgment of the novelty, appropriateness, quality, and importance” (Lovitts, 2008, p. 297).

Furthermore, the strength-based approach to education is also associated with the identification and development of students’ talents and skills in order for those students to apply the identified strengths productively (Schreiner, 2010). This can be implemented using assessment instruments to help learners recognize their strengths (Clifton & Harter, 2003). Louis (2011), however, cautioned that the mere identification of strengths in the learning context is not enough; strengths must be developed and used in order to become effective and spontaneous. An example of a strength instrument is: The Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). This assessment instrument measures human strengths in different forms; it also provides valuable information and insights on the contribution of strengths-based approaches to education (Lopez & Louis, 2009).

However, the studies are limited about how doctoral students specifically utilize their strengths. Yet, facilitating how doctoral students positively develop and grow over time is an implicit and explicit goal of doctoral programs (Gardner, 2009). Indeed, Gardner (2009) developed a monograph titled “The development of doctoral students: Phases of challenge and support” that addressed how to facilitate the development of doctoral students through using student areas of strength. Because, as noted by Clifton & Harter (2003), individuals gain more in the learning context when they develop and utilize their talents. Furthermore, the concept of strength-based education can be likened to the process of identity development in doctoral education (Gardner, 2009). In the identity development process, doctoral students are required to learn both habits of mind and content knowledge. They do this by exploring their abilities among multiple identities and then re-conceptualizing themselves to negotiate their valued identities

with a new identity as a scholar (Hall & Burns, 2009). Consequently, doctoral students experience various identities, from dealing with personal life situations to becoming doctoral students, to doctoral candidates who finally face the task of completing the research dissertation (Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2005; Walker et al., 2008). In each of these phases, the identity doctoral students develop influences the ability to persist and thrive in the research experiences (Baker & Pifer, 2011). Therefore, becoming aware and learning to apply one's strengths provides a positive identity experience for doctoral students in order to thrive during the transition from a doctoral student to an independent researcher (Lovitts, 2008).

Chapter Three addresses the methods and research design process. Essentially, a qualitative research protocol with a phenomenology methodology and a process of interpretive analysis was utilized for reflection and writing to explore education doctoral students' perceptions concerning the experiences of thriving during the transition to independent researchers. Also, this chapter explains how the conceptual framework was used to develop the interview questions used in this study, as well as the data collection and analysis processes.



### **CHAPTER 3. METHOD AND METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perceptions of education doctoral students and graduates regarding their experiences of thriving during the transition to independent researchers. The framework for the current study was guided by multiple perspectives on thriving and well-being theory drawn from positive psychology that explores positive human functioning and development and maintains there are five elements of well-being that enable people to thrive (Seligman, 2011). In this study, thriving is conceptualized as the process and experience of developing and applying positive characteristics to achieve positive outcomes in the doctoral education-learning context. This conceptualization of thriving was significant to gain a better understanding of the perceptions, meanings, and encounters of education doctoral students' and graduates' that resulted to their experiences of thriving during the transition to independent research roles.

Furthermore, the current study was guided by the following research questions: a) What are education doctoral students and graduates experiences as they transition from being students to independent researchers? b) What was the influence of their relationships and acquaintances during the transition to independent researchers? c) How, if any, have they experienced moments of transformation during the transition to independent researchers? d) How have they utilized their natural talents and personal strengths during the transition to independent researchers?

Overall, the chapter details the qualitative research procedure and methodology utilized for the study, including the data collection and analysis processes.

#### **Qualitative Research Procedure**

Berg (2007) noted that we do not conduct research just for the mere accumulation of data, rather, the central purpose of research is to discover answers to significant questions using a

systematic procedure. Therefore, qualitative research properly seeks answers to questions by examining various social and natural settings and individuals who occupy such settings (Berg, 2007). In other words, qualitative inquiry is a research procedure that seeks to understand and make sense of the social environment. It also seeks to understand how humans in their social environment interact and function in their given social settings (Glesne, 2006). In addition, qualitative research seeks to make sense of personal narratives and the conditions in which human stories intersect (Glesne, 2006).

The qualitative research approach of focusing on the perceptions of education doctoral students' and graduates' experience of thriving during the transition to independent research roles is relevant in this study, in order to hear firsthand the voices and experiences of education doctoral students and graduates who are perceived to thrive in their doctoral learning research journeys. Because one of the fundamental functions qualitative researchers seek to fulfill is to describe the processes and experiences that creates human patterns and terrains (Glesne, 2006). In addition, the rationale for the chosen qualitative research approach is to capture the descriptive insights and meanings education doctoral students and graduates make of their lived experiences of thriving in the graduate school research context. Additionally, qualitative research design is identified in the literature as a rich source of data that focuses on details and original contents (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). It is very useful when describing a phenomenon, attempting to gain a deeper understanding of an issue, making sense of a given phenomenon and generating new ideas and knowledge about the chosen phenomenon (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008). Likewise, these ideas was within the intent of this study.

Qualitative research also allows researchers study people's lived experiences and provide in-depth interpretation and descriptive meanings of what people make of their experiences and

environmental context in a naturalistic setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Within this context, education doctoral students and graduates in this study had the opportunity and space to describe their lived experiences and authentic perceptions concerning contributing influences to their experiences of thriving during the transition to independent researchers. This knowledge is significant given that experience is a major source of adult learning (Knowles, 1984). In this regard, qualitative research procedure provides the focus on the true nature of the real-life phenomenon as it is experienced by education doctoral students and graduates who seem to thrive in their learning research context (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008). In addition, qualitative research was considered vital to this study in examining education doctoral students' and graduates described experiences and theoretical patterns in their given context. Likewise, qualitative research provides the opportunities for the use of expressive languages and authentic voices in communicating real life events as they affect those being studied (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008). Thus, qualitative research is generative in nature, allowing the researcher to become open to "subjective experience as seen, heard, and felt" (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008, p. 179). In the same function, qualitative research allows the researcher to act as an instrument in underscoring the meanings to what is seen, heard, observed, and experienced (Gardner, 2005). Similarly, the researcher can examine how people give meanings to their daily lives and actions that helped them thrive. These experiences are unique and unquantifiable as qualitative research allow researchers to observe and discuss in specifics, the processes humans use to navigate, create, and maintain their social realities (Berg, 2007).

Therefore, qualitative research provides an authentic platform for participants to describe their ontological experiences, perceptions, and reflect on their beliefs and attitudes concerning the phenomenon of experiencing thriving in the educational doctoral context. As such,

qualitative research leads to detailed interpretation and descriptive analysis of lived experiences. Trochim and Donnelly (2008) refer to this process as “thick description” (p. 179). In this way the story of a person is told in detail and explanation is given that accounts for how something seems to happen in the given context. In a similar perspective, this approach is referred to as “careful description of ordinary conscious experience of everyday life” (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014, p. 88). In other words, an in-depth insight is provided that reflects how a phenomenon is experienced by participants. Drawing from these perspectives, a phenomenology methodological approach and interpretive paradigm of constructivist was utilized to provide interpretation of the shared realities that participants described as contributing to their experiences of thriving as they transition to independent researchers.

### **Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is a qualitative research process that study and explore the essence of a specific phenomenon, as well as the lived experience of participants in their social context (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008). In other words, a phenomenological inquiry focuses exclusively on human experiences and the interpretations given to the experiences in making meanings (Jones et al., 2014). According to Starks and Trinidad (2007), phenomenology involves the application of thick description and lived experience to provide understanding of how meaning and embodied knowledge is created through awareness of the human nature and its everyday realities. From this perspective, phenomenology research underscores the lived experience of individuals in order to make sense of the phenomenon that shapes their lives (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). This viewpoint suggests that people can employ lived experiences to shape and recreate their personal realities to make meanings from their context. In addition, phenomenologists seek to capture the meanings and common features, or essences, of human experiences (Jones et al.,

2014). From a phenomenological postulation, to engage in research is to question and want to understand the way we live and experience the world as human beings (Jones et al., 2014). For example, do people experience the world in a fair and equitable manner? In what way does a doctoral student who thrives experience graduate school differently than a doctoral student who does not thrive? These are fundamental questions a phenomenological inquiry can attempt to answer. Thus, individual lived experiences and perspectives are significant to the qualitative researcher. It provides a novel opportunity and insightful lens to view the world in which human beings live (Jones et al., 2014). It also allows the researcher to question the process and context in which the world is experienced.

Furthermore, in uncovering the essence of lived experiences, meanings are derived through the transformative process that provide insight on the lens that is used to view the world and how to live in the world in a certain way (Jones et al., 2014). Therefore, a phenomenological route was utilized to explore the context and lived experiences of participants in this study using the study questions to focus and make meanings of how education doctoral students and graduates live and thrive in their educational context. One of my goals as a qualitative researcher employing a phenomenological approach was to provide a far-reaching understanding that goes beyond mere reporting of facts (Cohen et al., 2011). In other words, one of the goals of this study was to provide a broad understanding that is thoughtful, authentic, and truly details the circumstances education doctoral students and graduates experience thriving as they transition to independent researchers.

Finally, by employing a phenomenological line of inquiry, this study provided qualitative data rooted in interpretation and descriptive words that is meaningful and insightful in explaining how education doctoral students and graduates live and thrive in their educational context. This

approach is worthwhile because in the realm of humanity, words and experiences have powerful meaning. Fundamentally, research of this nature that gives credence into how education doctoral students thrive is central to preparing current and future scholars, advance higher education goal to meet doctoral students' needs, as well as solidifying the pathway for addressing attrition in doctoral education in a broader context. Thus, this adventure of exploring students lived experience in the education doctoral learning context was worth the expedition.

### **Research Design Procedures**

The central aim of using interpretive endeavor to reflect and construct knowledge is to better comprehend the realities of human experience (Cohen et al., 2011). As previously stated, in this study, a qualitative research procedure guided by a phenomenological methodology and interpretive paradigm was used to reflect and write descriptive meanings of the described perceptions and lived experience of how education doctoral students and graduates experience thriving during the transition to independent researchers.

The interpretive paradigm, as described by Cohen et al. (2011) is a naturalistic constructivist approach to research that focuses on shared human experiences and meanings. It allows the interpretive researcher to reflect and describe their interpretation of the world around them. As noted by Stake (2010), all research inquires require interpretation in some given or holistic dimension. Thus, this understanding guides the work of interpretivists as they attempt to uncover the rationale that account for human behavior and social realities (Cohen et al., 2011). In support of this perspective, Jones et al. (2014), argued that interpretivists “emphasize meaning people make rather than facts” (p. 17). Although, it may seem like interpretivists are solely concerned with meaning making; however, the process of making meaning is indispensable to human experience. Furthermore, through the interpretive model a researcher can focus on human

actions and experience, as well as make meanings from the interpreted actions. In addition, the researcher can define and redefine the meanings of what is seen and held to construct knowledge using the process of interpretation and description. Similarly, in this study, through the research questions, the interpretative approach was employed to reflect and write meanings of how research participants experience shaped their process of thriving in the graduate school context.

### ***Sample and Participants***

The population for this study consisted of a purposive sampling of education doctoral students and graduates in two upper Midwest research universities in the United States. According to Cohen et al. (2011), purposive sampling is a vital feature of qualitative research that allows researchers to select “a sample that is satisfactory to their specific needs” until a level of saturation is achieved (p. 156). This sample is based on the researcher’s judgment that participants to be tested demonstrate the characteristics being studied (Cohen et al., 2011). Therefore, purposive sampling can be undertaken to achieve the following: representativeness, enable comparisons, focus on specific phenomenon, and to generate theories and ideas from the different sources (Cohen et al., 2011). In addition, purposive sampling provides greater depth to research studies than probability sampling (Cohen et al., 2011). It allows the researcher to access people with knowledgeable experiences about specific issues under study (Cohen et al., 2011). Thus, in this current study, purposive sampling was utilized to gain insights on research participants’ perceptions of their experiences of thriving during the transition to independent researchers.

Specifically, the purposive sampling population utilized for this study comprised of education doctoral students, who have: a) completed all requirements for the doctorate except dissertation (ABDs) and b) education doctoral program graduates who earned their doctoral

degree within the last two years. These individuals were selected because those who are ABD are currently conducting research and experiencing significant encounters that is impacting their lives and those who have graduated from education doctoral programs within the last two years were expected to remember their lived experiences in doctoral education. So, what are these experiences like? How are they making meaning from their experiences to thrive? How did the recent graduates navigate their everyday experience to thrive in completing their research dissertations? Overall, both groups (ABDs and recent education doctoral graduates) was identified and utilized for this study, because they are perceived to have lived experience in the doctoral learning context having persisted thus far in the pursuit of their doctoral ambitions. This selection approach is consistent with purposive sampling; it allows the researcher to select or build a population sample that is satisfactory in the researcher's judgment that the participants have "the particular characteristics being sought" in the study (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 156). In addition, this approach is permissible in qualitative research given that validity in qualitative inquiry is "a matter of degree rather than as an absolute state" (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 179). Also, the chosen participants interviewed for this study were selected to allow for the discovery of disciplinary perspectives and perceptions concerning the lived experiences of thriving during the transition to independent researchers from a disciplinary lens of education, since doctoral education program culture is mostly organized around the disciplines (Gardner, 2009).

A total of 12 participants from two institutions' discipline of education participated in this study. Eight of the participants were doctoral candidates, and four of the participants recently obtained their doctoral degrees in the field of education. The gender demographics of participants included nine females and three males. Most of the participants studied and worked fulltime while pursuing their degrees. Two of the participants were graduate assistants, and one



was currently not employed. Due to distance, data were obtained from participants through face-to-face, telephone, or video conferencing interviews.

### ***Data Collection***

Data collection is a major component of research (Glesne, 2006). In this regard, data collection details the process of assembling and amassing data (Cohen et al., 2011). It also involves capturing of the experiences that provide deep meanings and understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Jones et al., 2014). In this study, a semi-structured interview process with some open-ended questions was the primary data collection procedure utilized to gather data from participants. Field notes, memos and reflection notes was also sources of data for this study. The data collected was used to explore how participants experience thriving as they navigate the transition to independent researchers. There are four research questions developed from the literature review section and the theoretical framework for this study:

1. What are education doctoral students and graduates' experiences as they transition from being students to independent researchers?
2. What was the influence of their relationships and acquaintances during the transition to independent researchers?
3. How, if any, have they experienced moments of transformation during the transition to independent researchers?
4. How have they utilized their natural talents and personal strengths during the transition to independent researchers?

To collect data in this study, some initial questions was developed around the conceptual framework to explore various aspects of this study, as well as focus on the scope of this study. These initial questions were used to begin the semi-structured open-ended interview process and

they were general research questions that elicited participants' thought processes as they articulated significant moments in their doctoral experiences that captured the full essence of their social realities concerning the studied phenomenon of thriving.

### ***Interviews***

Interviews are described in the literature as a qualitative research approach used to gather descriptive data (Jones et al., 2014). It is a valuable resource for unique discovery and information gathering (Stake, 2010). Through interviews, researchers can discover and understand the views and assumptions of some participants that they never revealed except through the spoken word and close interaction (Stake, 2010). Therefore, interviews are a powerful tool for qualitative researchers (Gardner, 2005). Cohen et al. (2011) supports this assertion by stating that “interviews are a widely-used instrument for data collection” and as such, interviews are central to the human interaction process of producing knowledge (p. 409). Similarly, through interviews, both the interviewers and the interviewees can express their interpretation of the world through their personal epistemological lenses and experience (Cohen et al., 2011). Hence, interviews are not just the process of collecting data about life and everyday conversation. Rather, interviews are part of life itself and occur for specific purposes (Cohen et al., 2011). In research procedures, Jones et al. (2014) suggested that given the relevance of interview to phenomenological inquiry, “interviews must be conducted with individuals who have directly experienced the phenomenon of interest” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 91). They further emphasized, interview questions must be constructed to access the meaning of the studied phenomenon. In this study, after many stages of piloting and reconstruction, the interview questions were developed to provide excellent opportunities for participants to tell their stories in conducive space, their motivations, and the meanings they are making out of their everyday

experiences that is allowing them to experience thriving in the transition to independent researchers in education doctoral programs.

### ***Interview Process***

After I received consent from the Education Doctoral Program at North Dakota State University (NDSU) to conduct this study. I visited the University of North Dakota (UND) to discuss the research project and received a letter of cooperation from the department head of Educational Foundations and Research. Then, I submitted the proposed exempt research protocol to the NDSU Institutional Review Board for approval. Once the Institutional Review Board approved the study, I contacted the departmental administrative secretary of Education Doctoral Programs at NDSU via email to distribute the dissertation study invitation to eligible participants. Through this process, participants interested in participating in the study contacted me to indicate their interest and we established contacts. Similarly, I also emailed the dissertation study invitation to the department head of Educational Foundations and Research at UND, who had earlier promised to distribute the study invitation to other departmental heads in education and eligible participants at his department once I had the IRB approval. Because I anticipated the possibility that the institutions might not have current contact information for the students who have graduated, I used a snowball sampling technique and asked those who participated to contact their peers who graduated. However, this did not result in any additional participants.

When participants responded to my invitation and consented to take part in the study, I scheduled a face-to face interview at a location and time that was convenient for each individual. Interviews took place in a spot that allows for privacy such as a study room in the university library or a campus office. When participants arrived for the semi-structured interview conversation, participants were provided with an informed consent letter to be read and signed.

For those who were interviewed via distance using telephone or video conferencing, the consent letter was emailed to them. In addition, prior to each interview session, participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from participation at any time. Questions and prompts for the semi-structured interviews can be found in Appendix C. Each of the interviews was audiotaped with a digital recorder and the resulting data was transcribed manually to gain familiarity with the data in preparation for data analysis. After the manual transcription of the data, participants had the opportunity to review the data and check for accuracy. Most of the participants appreciated the opportunity to review the data. In addition, notes of verbal and non-verbal communication of participants were taken during the interview process and the information constituted part of the data for this study. The demographic information of participants interviewed in the study is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

*Interview Participants in this Study.*

Pseudonym	Gender	Employment Status	Education Doctoral Program Status
Suzanne	Female	Fulltime	Graduated (Ph.D.)
Albright	Female	Assistantship	Doctoral Candidate
Evelyn	Female	Fulltime	Graduated (Ph.D.)
Thomas	Male	Fulltime	Doctoral Candidate
Jennifer	Female	Fulltime	Doctoral Candidate
Abe	Male	Fulltime	Doctoral Candidate
Loretta	Female	Not Working	Doctoral Candidate
Celine	Female	Assistantship	Doctoral Candidate
Williams	Male	Fulltime	Doctoral Candidate
Helen	Female	Fulltime	Graduated (Ph.D.)
Megan	Female	Fulltime	Doctoral Candidate
April	Female	Fulltime	Graduated (Ph.D.)

## ***Data Analysis***

According to Jones et al. (2014), “to report data is not enough” (p, 157), rather, data must convey an understanding of the interpretation the researcher makes of the reported phenomenon (Jones et al., 2014). Thus, data analysis describes the process of organizing what has been seen, heard, and read to make sense and meanings about what was learned and observed in the process of the research journey (Glesne, 2006). Therefore, to analyze the data in a qualitative research study, the researcher describes, interprets, creates explanations, and develop ideas that explains the studied phenomenon (Glesne, 2006). Jones et al. (2014) expanded this idea further by recommending analyzing data through the lens of reflection and writing to provide in-depth descriptive interpretations on the essence of lived experience. Hence, in reading and reflecting on data collected, significant statements that provide an understanding on how participants experienced the studied phenomenon were identified for developing clusters of meaning used for writing thick description. In addition, Jones et al. (2014) suggested that data analysis should provide description that involves thoughtfulness, attentiveness to language, and a constant back-and-forth between thinking, reflecting, writing, formulating, and rethinking.

Drawing from these various perspectives on data analysis, in this current study, data collected through a semi-structured interview process was organized for analysis based on one of the seven ways that Cohen et al. (2011) described for organizing and presenting data analysis. Data for this study was organized and analyzed by the research questions. According to Cohen et al. (2011), “research question” is a useful mode of organizing and analyzing data because it draws together all relevant information for the researcher about the concerned issue (p. 552). Relying on this approach, the data was organized and analyzed by research question to focus on the scope of this study, using the interpretive paradigm of thick description of analysis to reflect

and write an in-depth interpretation of participants' perceptions concerning their lived experience of thriving during the transition to independent researchers. Furthermore, organizing and analyzing the research question using the interpretative approach of description is central to this analysis in order to move beyond just relating an account or narrating events procedure. Jones et al. (2014) noted that can leave the reader asking, "so what does this mean?" (p. 159). My choice of descriptive interpretation in this study enabled me to collect data that provides meaning and understanding. It also allowed me to move beyond what is said and provide deeper clarification of lived experience. This is the essence of phenomenology research in the first place. Thus, quotes and strong illustrations that demonstrate thriving were combined and linked with the conceptual and theoretical framework to provide a holistic view of what it means to experience thriving in the education doctoral learning context.

### ***Coding***

As earlier mentioned, the data generated from this study was transcribed verbatim and coded for analysis. Saldaña's (2013) "mechanics of coding" informed the coding process utilized in this study (p. 17). Coding describes the deconstruction process in research, whereby mass data is broken apart into sections, lines, and paragraphs and rearranged to produce a new understanding (Cohen et al., 2011). As noted by Saldaña (2013) "the art of coding requires that you wear your researcher's analytical lens" because how a researcher perceives and interprets the data depends on what type of lens the researcher wears (p. 7). Furthermore, when coding, the researcher labels the data that contains specific information and transcribed systematically (Saldaña, 2013). Labeling the data enables the researcher to identify similar information of interest for deeper understanding of the issue that the coded item represents (Cohen et al., 2011). Thus, coding represents a fundamental aspect of qualitative research towards the organization of

data in a systematic and structural manner. In this study, coding was instrumental in developing clusters of meaning, which, together was employed to write a description and interpretation of participants described perceptions and lived experiences about the phenomenon of thriving, as well as what influenced participants to thrive in the transition to independent researchers.

To code the data collected in this study, I engaged in the process of drawing meanings from the data by attempting to understand what is the participants saying, doing, and trying to accomplish? This process is regarded as “tactics for generating meaning” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 277). Specifically, I coded the data in this study by first reading each interview transcript to get a sense of the whole document; I also played the audio recording multiple times to cognitively connect with participants. Then, in the second stage, I re-read each transcript again to establish units of meaning by determining parts or clustering into themes for final emerging themes. In addition, in this second stage of re-reading the transcribed transcript, I separated and categorized the data that contains specific information by the research questions. This approach was useful in finding patterns and developing clusters of meaning. In this stage, I also assigned preliminary codes, words, and phrases that speak to the research questions since data for analysis was organized according to the research questions. Finally, in the third stage of the coding process, the major ideas and meanings were identified from the preliminary codes as the study emergent themes. These themes was utilized to described and interpret how participants experienced thriving during the transition to independent researchers.

In a nutshell, the coding process in this study was bracketed into three stages: a) reading the entire transcribed raw data, b) data categorizing and assigning of preliminary codes and, c) developing clusters of meaning through the identification of the final themes. Although these three stages of coding were identified in this study, it is important to state that it was not a linear



process, but rather a comprehensive process that overlapped during the process. Table 2 shows a summary of coding categories and the emergent themes

Table 2

*Summary of Codes and Themes.*

Codes Categories	Emergent Themes
A lot of reading It is just how independent you are at figuring it out Digging-in to figure it out If you get stuck on a research problem you dig in... I love to learn I intentionally engaged in my learning Learning with peers Learning on my own	<i>Digging-in</i>
I have put too much everything in doing it It is a long-time commitment. I never really fully put the work down It's just been immense, the sacrifices that I had to give There is a lot of investment in this process I have put in a lot of time and effort I attended conferences as much as I could and that helped me	<i>Commitment</i>
I had a good relationship with my advisor The students have helped. People were being very generous to me I could not have done this without my family I don't know how you do without a support system Being in a supportive environment Support and inspiration from faculties I felt like I really had a nice support system	<i>Supportive Relationships</i>
My motto became quitting is not an option I'm not "going to quit" Rise above what's right in your face Being an international student, you experience lots of challenges The dissertation requires consistence and then you persevere through it	<i>Persistence</i>

### ***Trustworthiness***

In qualitative research, validity is often discussed in terms of trustworthiness. Thus, towards the pursuit of a competent and worthy research study, qualitative researchers are required to maintain and preserve the fundamentals of trustworthiness in research inquiries by ensuring the credibility and accurate representation of data collected during research projects (Cohen et al., 2011). In this regard, four criteria are suggested by research scholars to satisfy and demonstrate the trustworthiness and validity in qualitative research (Jones et al., 2014). These criteria include: a) credibility; b) dependability; c) transferability; and d) confirmability (Jones et al., 2014). Credibility is believed to occur in qualitative research when others such as research participants, peers, and experts are used to confirm the research findings (Jones et al., 2014). Dependability requires the research process to be explicit and activities detailed and documented. Transferability means the findings are meaningful to others and results are relevant and applicable. Confirmability ensures researchers can link findings with data and emerging analysis (Jones et al., 2014). These approaches were considered and observed in maintaining trustworthiness in this study, including guarding against my subjectivity.

### ***Researcher Positionality***

One of my main purposes of carrying out this study was to better understand and channel my intellectual energy to study the positive experiences that allow education doctoral students to thrive. I recognize that a study of positive human experiences, transformative individual characteristics, and behavioral responses can articulate a vision of what actions and experiences lead to thriving in the doctoral learning context. Although this intent is genuine, I did recognize prior to this study the potential complexities I could run into due to my personal bias and the subjective nature of qualitative inquiry (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008). As a doctoral student, I

have had encounters and experiences that shape my everyday actions and decisions, just as the research participants I interviewed for this study. Going into this study, I was aware of some of the realities doctoral students are confronted with and the meanings they may make in their context. Yet, I knew, I could not speak for all. Because in reality, one's subjective experience might be different from another, or in another context, a student's personal story or experience might be the insight into promoting another student's thriving. Given these dynamics of human reality, I could not claim that I knew all that it takes to thrive in education doctoral program, or how doctoral students thrive in their context. Thus, my goal of carrying out this research study was to gain a better understanding of thriving in the doctoral learning context. In implementing this study, I went in with an open mind and was very conscious of my subjectivity and worded to remain objective. I also maintained neutrality to promote the voices of research participants' experience, although the interpretation and meanings of these participants experience was through my own epistemological lens.

In addition, to maintain the validity of data in this study, I applied a series of procedures that ensured triangulation in qualitative research (Jones et al., 2014). By definition, triangulation is the process and variety of ways researchers use to establish evidence, meaning, and validity in their research studies (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008). Stake (2010) described triangulation in qualitative research as "a win-win situation" (p. 124) and noted that if additional checking or other evidence confirm what has been, this is a good approach. He further stated that triangulation helps to improve research from multiple vantage points. It also ensures credibility and brings confidence to research findings. Cohen et al. (2011) in their explanation of triangulation notes that in its literal logic, the approach is a scientific technique of "physical measurement" (p. 195). However, triangulation has become a rich source of qualitative data

evidence to map out, explain more details, and study the complexity of human behavior from more than one viewpoint. Drawing from these multiple perspectives, I utilized multiple data sources to ensure triangulation in this study. For example, the literature and other scholarly works were applied as document analysis to validate the research findings.

I also utilized the open-ended interview protocol to collect broad views of data from participants, recheck and rephrase question to confirm understanding during the semi-structured interview process. I also engaged in informal observation of participants, and wrote field notes during the interviews. With regard to memo notes, it assisted me to write down personal reflective thoughts and ideas that occurred during this research journey. I maintained a file to store scholarly articles, feedbacks, and any information relevant to the research study. All relevant materials such as interview transcripts were properly secured, and member checking was employed to ensure the participants' intended meaning was captured. These steps were important in this research to keep track of the useful information and the conversations that validated the research (Glesne, 2006). The trustworthiness of this study was also maintained by incorporating feedback from the researcher's faculty mentor whom the researcher worked with during the research study. These procedures are significant to the researcher as qualitative researchers ensure proper description and analysis are provided that reflect the actual nature of the data gathered throughout research studies.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

Qualitative inquiries, like most inquiries involving human relationships, are replete with many underlying ethical issues at every step of the process (Jones et al., 2014, p. 174). It also defines the interactions and decision-making processes that guide the sensitivity of the research. Furthermore, ethical considerations can be represented within the axiological and integral

components of how a researcher anticipates and handles research issues, including dealing with human subjects and information. In addition, ethical consideration demonstrates the worth, values, and integrity that buffer the entire process of the research. It contributes to the trustworthiness of any given research protocol, an important caveat I was mindful of when conducting this dissertation research study. In a brief summary, I ensured ethics was strictly adhered to in this study by observing the following norms:

- An IRB approval was obtained before the collection of data
- There was a written communication and consent in place for all research participants.
- From the onset, the researcher's role and the participant's role were clearly articulated to ensure all parties understood these roles as they participated in this study.
- Participants were informed that involvement and participation was voluntarily, and potential participants could withdraw from participation at any given time without penalties.
- Participants' rights, values, and concerns about the study were respected and addressed before, during, and after the research process.
- A full disclosure of the purpose of the research, as well as the use of the data collected, was made known to participants.
- Finally, data collected were treated with integrity and not misrepresented or misused.

The next chapter includes a brief introduction of participants, study findings, and related interpretations. An understanding of these findings is necessary to capture the meaningful

insights and encounters that shape education doctoral students' and graduates' experiences of thriving during the transition to independent researchers, with specific reference to the independent dissertation research experience.

## CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

This study examined the perceptions of education doctoral students and graduates on their experiences of thriving during the transition to independent researchers. Independent researchers, in this context, refers to education doctoral students who have advanced to candidacy and education doctoral graduates who conducted independent systematic inquiries that contributed to knowledge. In other words, a doctoral student with the primary responsibility for conducting research is regarded as an independent researcher. The need to support more doctoral students in education and related disciplines with meaningful knowledge and initiatives that promote thriving during the dissertation research experience compelled my interest in carrying out this inquiry. Thriving is a concept defined in the academic literature as a process of positive functioning in human experience (Benson & Scales, 2009). It entails developing and utilizing positive characteristics and behavioral responses to achieve positive outcomes (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). For example, there are five elements of wellbeing postulated by Seligman (2011) that enable thriving: positive emotions, engagements, meaning, accomplishments, and positive relationships which were visually represented in Figure 1.

These five elements of wellbeing that enable thriving along with five other characteristics of thriving discussed in the literature review section of this study was combined to develop this study overall conceptual framework. In total, 10 concepts of thriving constituted the conceptual framework in this study (Figure 2). The framework is matched and discussed with the study emergent themes at the beginning of Chapter 5.

The central research question examined in this study was: What are the experiences that allow education doctoral students and graduates to thrive as they navigate the transition to independent researchers? Also, four other secondary research questions were developed from the

literature review section and the study conceptual framework to focus on the scope of the study. Furthermore, this study is informed by a phenomenological and interpretive paradigm of description as described earlier in Chapter 3. The current chapter introduces study participants with their pseudonyms and provides a brief introduction of each to help readers get to know the interviewees in the study. Then, the study draws on a variety of significant statements participants shared in response to the interview questions to make sense of the study findings. In addition, contextual cues are provided in brackets in some of the direct quotes in the study, to better illuminate participants' comments.

From the analysis of the interview data, four major themes emerged that provided clusters of meaning on how participants tended to thrive during the transition to independent researchers. These themes include: (a) digging-in, which implies the ability to effectively engage in intellectual learning process at a deep level, (b) commitment, realized through a variety of facets of engagement, (c) supportive relationships, a process of positive interpersonal experience, and (d) persistence, which was realized through resilience and motivation. Other than the major emergent themes listed above, there were other factors such as analytical and writing abilities that contributed to participants' experience of thriving. Some of these factors are discussed in the next chapter. The emergent themes reflected the majority of the elements found in the data that contributed to participants' experience of thriving. These themes are reflected and supported by four aspects of this study's conceptual model. Each of the emergent themes are discussed in more significant detail after the following participant introduction.

### **Brief Introduction of Participants**

The following pseudonyms and descriptions introduce the 12 participants interviewed for this study.



*Participant 1:* Suzanne is a recent doctoral graduate of education. It took her over 15 years from completing her master's degree to decide to pursue her doctorate degree. Once she decided to enroll in a doctoral program, her chosen motto became "quitting is not an option." She completed all her doctoral work and research via distant studies. Suzanne was interviewed for this study through a phone conversation.

*Participant 2:* Albright is a single doctoral candidate currently working on her dissertation. She is a deep thinker and likes to interact with people. Although, she was very shy at the beginning of her doctoral program because she is from another country, her doctoral experience of a safe learning environment and her ability to think things through have really helped her. Albright feels if she were to undergo her doctoral journey all over again, one thing she would do differently is to strive for academic publications as a graduate student. The interview for Albright was face-to-face and took place at a library study room in one of the universities where this study was conducted.

*Participant 3:* Evelyn is a recent doctoral graduate of education. She is also a faculty member at another university's department of education. She described herself as a very motivated person, yet, her doctoral experience was very challenging and so she keeps thinking of ways the process can be better for others. Evelyn was interviewed for this study through video telecommunication.

*Participant 4:* Thomas is a male doctoral candidate working on his dissertation. He is married with children and employed as a faculty member at another university. His doctoral experience has had an immense impact on him, from how he conducts his everyday work to how he interacts with his students. Thomas said his biggest challenge was going through the doctoral program while trying to have a career and a family. He had to sacrifice in one or both areas in

order to do well in his doctoral studies. Thomas was interviewed for this study face-to-face at his office location in the university where he currently works as a faculty member.

*Participant 5:* Jenifer is married and an older adult currently working on her dissertation proposal. She describes herself as a self-directed person and stated that “being alone with your own thoughts is very valuable.” Jenifer was interviewed for this study face-to-face at a library study room in one of the universities where this study was conducted.

*Participant 6:* Abe is a doctoral candidate working on his dissertation. He is married and was a business owner before he made the switch to the academia. Abe said the transition from the business to the academic world took him a long time because the professional cultures are different. He was interviewed for this study face-to-face at a library study room in one of the universities where this study took place.

*Participant 7:* Loretta is a single mother currently working on her dissertation. She hopes to graduate in the spring semester, but would not mind if her work extends to the summer semester. Loretta began her doctoral program after having taught as a community college teacher for many years. The idea of research was new to her except for what she did in her master’s thesis, which was over ten years ago. Loretta was interviewed for this study face-to-face at a library study room in one of the universities where this study was conducted.

*Participant 8:* Celine is a doctoral candidate working on her Ph.D. dissertation. She has a new graduate assistantship position as a teacher support specialist. Before Celina began her doctoral journey, she was an English teacher that worked in the K-12 system for many years. Celine was interviewed for this study face-to-face at a reserved library study room in one of the universities where this study was conducted.

*Participant 9:* Williams is a doctoral candidate beginning his dissertation. He is a father, married, and employed full time as a staff member at one of the universities where this study was conducted. In addition, Williams is a firstborn American child whose parents migrated to the United States as refugees. Also, he is a first-generation graduate student and identifies as a minority. Williams was interviewed for this study face-to-face in an available room that allowed for privacy within the campus site in one of the universities where this study was conducted.

*Participant 10:* Helen is a recent Ph.D. graduate of education employed as an assistant professor. She is married, has a child, and started her doctoral studies while working fulltime at her current university of employment. The interview for Helen in this study was initially scheduled in a coffee shop within a university location, but for privacy purposes, on the day of the interview it was relocated to the library where the face-to-face interview took place.

*Participant 11:* Megan is a doctoral candidate just starting work on her dissertation. She drove over six hours every third weekend to attend classes. Megan has two master's degrees in business and was introduced into education while she was employed as an ESL instructor. She loves working with students and diverse groups of people. Megan decided to begin her doctoral studies because she "finds herself" in higher education. She received a study scholarship and as a result felt obligated to do well on behalf of this scholarship in appreciation for the financial support. Megan was interviewed for this study over the telephone.

*Participant 12:* April is married and just completed her dissertation defense. She is feeling very relieved to have completed the dissertation process. She thought the process was "scary and terrifying" because of the many unknowns and having to do it on her own. However, now that she is completely done, she feels good about her project, what she has accomplished,

and what she learned during the doctoral transitional experience. The interview for April took place via video telecommunication.

As the 12 participants shared their experiences and perceptions as they transitioned to independent researchers, four major themes became clear in relation to what allows students to thrive in the doctoral learning research context: (a) digging-in, which implies engaging in intellectual learning process at a deep level, (b) commitment, realized through dimensions of engagement, (c) supportive relationships, a positive interpersonal experience, and (d) persistence, which was realized through resilience and motivations.

### **Emergent Themes**

In order to describe how education doctoral students and graduates demonstrate thriving during the transition to independent researchers in this study, I immersed myself in the data, sifting through the participants' shared experiences for actions and meaningful statements that epitomize thriving. The presented themes help to illuminate the foundation for understanding what enables participants to experience thriving during the transition to independent researchers. In this chapter, these themes are discussed using the participants' actual descriptive statements and provides corroborating descriptions and interpretations. In addition, contextual cues are provided in brackets in some of the direct quotes in the study to better explain participants' comments in the related circumstance.

#### **Digging-in**

The first identified theme in this study is digging-in. The theme digging-in is a figurative expression that describes how doctoral students and graduates in this study approached doctoral learning in an effective manner that facilitated their academic growth and development to experience thriving during the transition to independent researchers. In this regard, digging-in

describes the intellectual learning process, where education doctoral students learn to significantly grow and develop at a very deep level towards meeting their doctoral learning expectation to conduct independent research successfully. This process of digging-in as experienced by participants involve the ability to think and work independently, learn with others, and being willing to substantially commit a significant amount of time and other resources into the learning process. These undertaken participants related helped them positively grow and function to meet the doctoral learning expectations. In summary, to engage in the process of digging-in, participants applied self-directed learning, learning with peers, and love for learning.

Many of the participants interviewed for this study, though talented adults who seemed to have achieved much in their respective lives, described their doctoral experience in terms of seeking knowledge during the independent research process. For example, in describing their acculturation experience as doctoral students new to independent research, participants used phrases such as: “digging-in,” “figuring out,” “a lot of reading,” “learning with peers,” and “learning on my own” to describe how they learned intensely to conduct independent research successfully. These phrases convey the ideas of how the various dispositions of digging-in participants applied enabled them to properly evolve and function during their dissertation transition experience. For example, Albright discussed how spending a lot of time reading and making connections helped her during her dissertation research experience, thus, revealing how digging-in through spending of time reading and reflecting contributed to her experience of thriving in her doctoral learning context. In a nutshell, the process of digging-in, as described through participants’ experiences reflected deep learning engagement in graduate studies. In other words, deep learning engagement is a learning process that goes beyond surface learning,

to probe deeper for understanding and meaning (Tagg, 2003). In the context of doctoral education, Gardner (2009) conceptualized deep learning in a similar manner to digging-in, as the process of developing habits of the mind in graduate school; that is a process of acquiring the set of skills and knowledge necessary to gain intellectual understanding in the learning community. Abe related how he spent over four hours digging-in to develop a better understanding of a theory he was interested in studying. Spending this much time enabled Abe to gain the knowledge he desired about the given theory.

Similar to Abe's experience, other participants in this study indicated that their ability and willingness to engage in digging-in enabled them to thrive because when they entered doctoral programs they discovered a lot of learning was required and the inclination to independently address the learning requirement was helpful. For example, when participants were asked how they effectively learned or were guided to do research to in graduate school, Suzanne, who recently graduated with a Ph.D., remarked: "My own digging-in to figure it out." She further described her learning experience and engagement in a broader context by stating:

When I first started [my doctoral studies] there was a 15 years gap. Think about all the technology that happened in 15 years! So I had to learn how to use the library, you know. I had to learn how to write a literature review; in all those things I did and then just learned what kind of research was actually out there, what methods, what methodology... existed and frankly, I feel like I learned most of that in my coursework. And then once I started to do the research... I had enough tools to be able to apply them.

Suzanne's ability and inclination to engage in the learning process on her own shows the level of individual learning that goes on in graduate school. Loretta who is a single mom and working on her dissertation, discussed how she learned to do independent research on her own

“through the reading of articles”, and stated that “I don’t know if they so much taught us how to do research in the program. I think it was more expected to do the research. So, I think it was more learning on my own.” Again, Loretta comment suggest a significant level of self-directed learning in the graduate school. She discovered that doctoral students were expected to know how to do research; as a result, she had to learn how to conduct research on her own through the approach of digging-in. Abe, who was a business owner before starting his doctoral program, remarked: “If you get stuck on a research problem sometimes you dig in to try to figure out [and learn] what is the best way to deal with this.” Paraphrased, during the doctoral research process, Abe observed learning in terms of digging-in is an integral act to figuring out the missing pieces. Megan, who just completed her dissertation defense, stated, “I need to dig into somewhere or figure it out myself.” Albright, who is completing her dissertation, took a deep breath, smiled, and stated; “In my case, I transitioned by myself, trying to figure out, you know, what are the parts? What kind of research areas should I focus?” Helen, who is now an assistant professor in a four-year undergraduate university, put her experiences this way:

I came from an English-literature background where the type of research experience is the one that you are just in the archives reading and writing on your own and it is a solitary experience and so when I got to my dissertation work, I sort of expected you do the same thing...I am going to dig through the archives [to learn and write my own arguments].

A close examination of Helen’s and other participants’ narrative conveys the idea that a high level of self-directedness is useful in the digging-in process during the doctoral learning experience. For example, Helen stated that she comes from a background where you are on your

own reading and writing. When she got to her dissertation work, she expected digging-in would be a personal experience, and it really was.

From the several participants' descriptive narratives presented and the connections drawn, the importance of digging-in, which describes the intellectual learning process in which education doctoral students learn to significantly grow and develop to experience thriving during the transition to independent researchers through deep learning, cannot be overemphasized. Interestingly, in doctoral studies there is a lot of learning (digging-in) that takes place (Gardner, 2009; Golde & Walker, 2006; Lovitts, 2005). In fact, learning to become scholars and stewards of the discipline who will make contribution to knowledge is at the heart of the formation of doctoral education (Walker et al., 2008).

Furthermore, for many of the participants, the process of digging-in was experienced in three different ways: a) through self-directed learning, b) learning with peers, and c) love for learning.

*Digging-in through self-directed learning:* Self-directed learning occurs when individuals assume primary responsibility for learning activities (Rossman et al., 2015). It is an established principle of adult learning and was evident in the lives of participants. Within this context, participants discussed how they took the initiative to learn on their own as doctoral students. For example, Jennifer discussed during her interview conversation that as an individual she is a self-directed person who likes to immerse herself totally in the literature and really attempt to understand it. As a result, Jennifer likes to dig into different type of academic resources to get better understanding and really be on top of her topic. She remarked, "I'm a pretty self-directed person to start with... and so, to have the time to dig into it individually and consult with other people when needed is a luxury." Jennifer's nature of being self-directed for the most part



conforms to doctoral education requirements for conducting independent research in graduate school. In fact, Albright reinforced this position by discussing that during her dissertation experience, she engaged in intense reading on her own to educate herself. This experience led her to conclude: "I think you have to be a self-directed learner as a Ph.D. student at least in my own experience. I spend a lot of times reading." Being self-directed seems to be an idea some of the participants enjoyed and that excitement enabled them to engage in digging-in. Williams notes: "The main reason while I am in my program is that I was able to essentially research generally whatever I wanted to. You were essentially driving like you had the wheel." Celine also remarked, "You know, the thing is, a lot of [doctoral work] has to be done independently and that was something that I really liked it if for." What participants' comments suggest is that the nature of doctoral programs reflect self-directed learning and that was one of the aspects they liked as graduate students. Thus, self-directed learning was one of the effective ways digging-in was applied that contributed to participants' experience of thriving.

*Digging-in through conversations and learning with peers:* Another way participants both experienced and applied digging-in was through conversations and learning with peers. In this regard, participants discussed how they gained a lot of knowledge through working or interacting with their peers. Suzanne explains:

I have a friend who...we were studying totally a different subjects, but he and I came together every week with the intention, sometimes more successful than not...we are studying and working on our academic work and that helped me a lot to keep going.

As seen through Suzanne's related experience, studying with another fellow student or peer helped her to keep advancing in her doctoral work. Most of the participants also discussed the value and knowledge they derived from learning with colleagues or classroom peers.

However, due to the lack of structure and independent nature of the doctoral dissertation research process, many of the participants in their discourse during the interviews lamented missing learning with peers after their coursework was completed. For example, Thomas, who is working on his dissertation, commented:

The transition is just being out of the classroom is another big thing [for me] just not being in that environment where you are able to be around other peers who have the same similar interests or discussing the same things. And so, you kind of lose that [learning environment with peers] where you have that ability and place to bounce ideas off each other in a kind of a safe place...

Similarly, Loretta's comments support Thomas's view that peer interaction is positive, and missed after the transition out of the classroom environment. She described digging-in through learning with peers by stating:

I love the interaction with other students. I miss that especially in this aspect of it [dissertation research]. You know doing the interviews and writing your dissertation. It's like, it will be nice to have someone to bump ideas off. I miss that I really do. I don't miss going to class at night, but I definitely missed the interactions with the students, because I have learned a lot from them. I mean in some of my classes the teachers didn't really teach; I learned from the other students.

Overall, the participants consistently observed that the aspect of learning with peers is a positive part of digging-in in their experience. This idea of learning with peers can also be related to the supportive relationships theme discussed later.

*Digging-in through the love for learning:* This term describes how the emotional lens contributed to participants digging-in experience. In this regard, Williams observes, "We kind of

sterilize education, we don't talk about love in education." Williams used this notion to express the sentiment that the impact love for learning could play in student growth and development is often not stressed enough in the discourse of education. But in his experience, he has benefited more from developing affection towards learning. Other participants described their experience of the love for learning in terms of the motivational force that propelled them into digging-in. This invariably resulted in an experience of thriving during their doctoral journeys. For example, when asked "what is it about you that enabled you to become effective when conducting dissertation research?" after a brief pause and a gentle smile, Helen made sense of her digging-in experience this way:

I think part of it was, being highly motivated and just absolutely in love with my subject. Hmm, when I talked to people who are not in love with their subjects, I am like, [I don't know how they do it] because you have to work so hard, you know. So, if you are not in love with what you are doing and what you are researching, I feel like that adds a whole level of another pain.

In doctoral studies, when students are conducting research, they are learning. Although Helen's thoughts about the love for subject topic which indicate a chosen area of learning, in a broader context, Helen's statement also suggests love for learning is also critical in the research process. She believes it is a whole level of pain added; if a student is not in love with what he/she is studying (paraphrase). Indeed, learning is the whole essence of education. Of course, in any meaningful adventure, love, which is connected to positive emotion is an integral part of the experience. Abe, who transitioned slowly into the academic community had stated that during the early stages of his doctoral program he lacked confidence in his ability to conduct

independent research. Notwithstanding this feeling of inadequacy he had, the love for learning was instrumental to his digging-in experience. He stated:

I absolutely love doing research. I love it, even if I don't have the confidence in my ability to do it well, I truly enjoy the process. And that whole experience of just digging into stuff and I am like okay, someplace in here there is a story... in all of these numbers there is a story that's just waiting to get out. It's like a big puzzle and that also keeps me going just the love of doing it. So, I had to keep reminding myself of those things you know.

Although Abe expressed little confidence in his abilities, the love for digging-in to find out the “big puzzle” has sustained him in engaging in learning activities. Similarly, Suzanne, who has been out of school for over 15 years before commencing her doctoral studies, in describing her experience in doctoral education had remarked,

The [one] thing about me is that I love to learn. So, the fact that I had this opportunity to learn in this way. I think was helpful. I do feel like, I learned a lot in the coursework but definitely through the research as well.

The experience and insights of participants have related above, ultimately reveal the extent that the love for learning played in their experience of digging-in. In reality, academic work can be a daunting task. However, many doctoral students do not envisage at the onset of their doctoral journey the extent of digging-in that is expected to occur in graduate school. The stories presented above appear to suggest a similar experience. Interestingly, there is a lot of digging-in that takes place in doctoral studies. The love for learning can be a game changer. An approach participants have expressed helped them thrive during their transitions to independent researchers. In addition, participants were able to navigate the difficulty involved in doing

intellectual work by describing how the love for what they researched in graduate school helped them, a trait Helen, Suzanne, and others thought were useful in their doctoral experience.

In conclusion, participants' discussed experiences in this theme, reflects digging-in, a figurative expression utilized to describe the intellectual learning process of how doctoral students and graduates in the study approached doctoral learning in an effective manner. Also, digging-in is a process that contributed to the academic growth and development of participants in their experience of thriving during the transition to independent researchers. Although digging-in is found to be extremely beneficial in the doctoral learning research experience as related by the participants in this study. It is important to point out that it is an intensive process that some of the participants' stated that it reflects the nature of doctoral education. In this study, the digging-in process was characterized by self-directed learning, learning with peers, and love for learning.

### **Commitment**

Closely associated to the process of digging-in is the second theme of commitment. This theme of commitment describes the level of mental, time, financial, and personal sacrifices participants dedicated to their doctoral studies, and in particular, the transition to independent researchers. Commitment, which also underlies how engagement and involvement is realized in many dimensions has been described by Schreiner (2013) as the investment of time and effort to achieve desired educational goals. Seligman (2011) described commitment, or how engagement is realized, more specifically as the process of being productive and "completely absorbed in a task" (p. 16). He also promoted the idea that if anyone wishes to maintain well-being and achieve something meaningful, that individual needs to be committed to a course. In thriving research, the concept of commitment is perceived as a protective factor and healthy attitude to advance

one's potentials (Maddi, 2006). Commitment also underscores the functioning lifestyle of involvement in one's context, in contrast to the individual's choice to withdraw, isolate, or disengage (Maddi, 2006). In other words, commitment is realized through a lifestyle of participation and deep involvement. In an educational context, Benishek et al. (2005) described commitment as the willingness to put forth sustained efforts to excel in learning context. For participants in this study, the level of commitment they invested over time into their doctoral education process contributed immensely to their thriving during transitions to independent researchers. For example, participants discussed demonstrating commitment in their doctoral programs through investment of time and financial resources in order to realize their educational goals and desires. In addition, participants' commitment was also realized through their sustained efforts, personal sacrifices and sacrifices others such as family and friends committed on behalf of these students. Time and financial commitment is discussed below to demonstrate how participants reflected on their doctoral learning commitment.

*Commitment through time investment:* To gain mastery of a skill, it takes deliberate effort and commitment. "Effort is the amount of time spent on the task" (Seligman, 2011, p. 115). Although participants interviewed in this study were not probed for the specific amount of time they committed to their doctoral learning process, comments such as, "I have to finish the [doctoral] work. I have put too much everything in doing it, whether it is time, resources ... energy, whatever..." from Williams drew attention to how participants committed enormous time towards their doctoral research process to realize success. While discussing her research experience, Albright also stated: "I spent a lot of time researching. I spend a lot of time reading." Suzanne also discussed how being a doctoral student is a long-term commitment and within that long timeframe, she continually worked on her research project. She remarked: "You know, one

thing about being a doctoral student is different from being, you know, a bachelor's student or master's student is that it is a long-term commitment. Most people don't do their doctoral program in a year or two." This was true in Suzanne experience as she spent almost four years in completing her doctoral program. Some other doctoral students may even last longer especially for those who study part-time. As stated by Gardner (2009), most doctoral students in education are full-time employees with other life commitments. As a result, doctoral studies for most graduate students in education is a long-term experience, especially for those who study part-time. Suzanne discussed further that during the long-term process of being a doctoral student, life events happen, and when they occur, for doctoral students "to be able to keep going," they require a firm commitment. In addition, she stated that during her doctoral work, she would always carry her work with her in order to utilize any free time to work continually on her project. Suzanne carrying her work and constantly working on it demonstrated how well she committed herself to the doctoral program. Suzanne's view is seconded by Thomas, who works fulltime and also has a family. But he constantly dedicates time to work on his doctoral project in order to do well in his studies. He observes:

Going through the [doctoral] program while having, trying to have a career and having a family, it's just been intense. The time requirements and the sacrifices that I've had to give in one or both of the other areas with family and work in order to try to do well in school.

Suzanne's and Thomas's comments portray time commitment is one of the essential accommodations doctoral students should significantly consider to positively navigate graduate studies. After all, it seems very likely that doctoral students in their long-term experience in

doctoral studies will encounter roller-coaster moments that will require unwavering time commitment to thrive. For example, Suzanne notes:

Many of us are full-time employees, and that was my case. I was a full time employee and so, the challenge I think in that long time commitment having...you know most of us are older...we probably have other things in our lives and during eight years that I was a student, you know just life happens so I think that certainly is a challenge, you know to be able to keep going when you know. In my case my brother passed away in the time I was doing my doctoral program so that personal piece was a challenge at times.

Suzanne's comment highlights some of the life circumstances participants navigate while committing to their doctoral studies. Clearly, it takes a committed student to lose a loved one as Suzanne did, yet still commit time to the realization of her educational goals. In a similar context, but a dissimilar experience, Megan was faced with the challenge of distance, driving over six hours every third weekend to attend classes. Her commitment experience seems compelling in relation to the effort she discussed as a student who studied from a distance. She stated:

I spent three and a half years driving to Fargo to complete my coursework. And, you know, I have put in a lot of time and effort and now I have one final piece that is keeping me away from obtaining my diploma. And so, it is like the last chapter that I have to complete, so there is obviously, there is a personal drive to just want to get that done, because, I have already put in so much work.

Spending these hours driving to class speaks a lot about Megan's commitment to her doctoral studies. Also, Albright sees this experience of time commitment in doctoral studies as the passport to succeed in doing independent research. She remarked: "I spent a lot of time



reading, I attended conferences as much as I could, and that helped me into going into independent research. Because going to conferences, networking with people, attending sessions, that was a good exercise for me.” From this experience, it is clear Albright invested a considerable amount of time and energy into her doctoral journey to experience thriving. Perhaps, the realization of the impact of committing a lot of time and energy to the doctoral learning process led Suzanne to state during her interview that in the doctoral learning context, “there is a lot of investment in the process”. Indeed, participants expressed views conveying the understanding that time commitment is relevant in doctoral learning. It is associated towards achieving doctoral educational goals.

*Commitment through financial investment:* Another aspect participants spoke of in relation to commitment in their doctoral learning process was financial commitment. Participants discussed how committing or receiving financial resources in their doctoral learning contributed to their success. For example, Celine reflected on her doctoral experience and narrated how she invested money buying books that contributed to her learning experience. She noted:

I’ve been building my library on assessment. I have been building it on how we can change instruction in the classroom. So I have spent quite a bit of money you know, from my own pocket which as graduate students we never have any [*sic*].

In addition, Celine related she invested in buying books because she believes reading is a huge part of doctoral learning experience and as such, she thinks doctoral students who do not invest in books are doing themselves a disservice given the preparation expectation of potential scholars. For this reason, Celine was committed to building her library by buying books. For Megan, part of her commitment she exhibited towards her doctoral studies stemmed from the fact that she felt a sense of obligation because she received a scholarship; as a result, her

commitment was a way to show appreciation for the financial award she received. While Celine's book purchases showed how she demonstrated her commitment in her doctoral learning context, Megan receiving a financial award reveals what was driving her commitment. She notes:

I received a scholarship and you know, I feel obligated to do well on behalf of this scholarship. You know, to the individual who provided me with the financial support to take this on [doctoral studies]. I feel indebted to them to do well.

In Williams's experience, commitment as an approach to navigate doctoral education is an absolute idea he cannot negotiate. He related that having spent most of his entire life going to school, he has accumulated a lot of student loans. So it will make no sense if he is not committed to his Ph.D. education. Again, finance in terms of accumulated student loans, is driving Williams commitment in his approach to doctoral education. Suzanne also had a similar experience. In her case, she discussed receiving scholarship and tuition benefits through her employment. As a result, she felt a sense of commitment because people were financially investing in her education. Abe professed a comparable remark by acknowledging that other people have invested in his studies. He stated: "a lot of other people have invested in my time to pursue this goal." Abe's remarks suggest that the investment of others in him was a driving factor in his commitment in doctoral studies. Overall, participants shared experiences in the study reveals financial commitment – whether it is their own money or from another source – is associated with students' derived commitment.

Furthermore, through their discussed experiences participants also indicated how commitment was realized and demonstrated in various actions allowed them to thrive during the transition to independent researchers. Thus, commitment is not a passive act, but rather, an

engaged concept demonstrated in actions. In describing how she successfully navigated her dissertation experience Suzanne related instances she acted on her commitment. She stated: “I don’t think there was a week that I didn’t think about it [the dissertation research] and probably any two weeks that went by that I didn’t continue to work on it”. Suzanne’s commitment to mentally think about her dissertation and work on it explains her progress and some of the contributing aspects to her thriving experience in doctoral education. It also indicates commitment is an action-implied concept. As earlier referenced, commitment underscores the functioning lifestyle of involvement in one’s context, in contrast to the individual’s choice to withdraw, isolate, or disengage (Maddi, 2006). In Helen’s experience, her commitment was what helped her through the overwhelming aspect of beginning her dissertation. She stated,

I, starting my dissertation process ...most overwhelming part was actually getting started, and knowing where to start. So, what my sort of organizational schema was that I sort of mapped out all of the literature that I needed to read, and I made sure that I read so many articles, and books, and I made little annotations for them for me to reference back later and eventually, I had compiled enough work [that] I was kind of, I felt like, I can make some argument about this literature... I also really committed myself to doing a certain amount of reading and writing every day... I had this huge stack of books and articles that I knew I needed to go through and I just sort of, every day, for maybe four or maybe five, six hours, read, wrote annotations, and eventually that sort of built up into this body of work that I had done. And so ...I really sacrificed a lot, I read so much, and wrote so much.

For Thomas, his commitment allowed him to create deadlines for himself to navigate the unstructured stage of doctoral education successfully. Because of this experience, he believes

that doctoral students should intertwine commitment into their overall doctoral journey through a commitment to establish scholarly habits by setting milestones. He remarked:

Nobody is going to do this for you and nobody is going to kind of create those deadlines and you just have to do that yourself and it took some time to realize that and create the habits that have allowed me to progress thus far.

In general, commitment as presented in this theme related some of the engaged approaches and sense of obligations that contributes to doctoral students experience of thriving during the transition to independent researchers. From participants' described experiences, commitment which evokes a strong sense of dedication is an essential capability to approach doctoral education. In addition, participants expressed views that indicated spending a substantial amount of time to study, reading research articles, investing in purchasing academic books, and making personal sacrifices are all pragmatic approaches in the realization of one's educational goals. Participants shared experiences also suggest, dedicated endeavors in terms of commitment is extremely beneficial during the transition to independent researchers. It also reveals a moral obligation aspect for doctoral students. For example, through commitment, recipients of kind deeds were able to show appreciation to others who have committed resources and invested in their education, as it was in Suzanne's experience. Finally, Gardner and Barnes (2007) observed that commitment through a deeper level of involvement and engagement in graduate school holds many benefits for graduate students. Among these benefits are persistence, retention, high satisfaction with the educational experience, cognitive growth, and academic success. In this study, the theme of commitment overall, showed how participants dedicated time, energy, and other resources to experience thriving during the transition to independent researchers.

## **Supportive Relationships**

The third emerging theme synthesized in this study, is supportive relationships. The essence of this theme describes how doctoral students and graduates in the study expressed how the influence of supportive relationships positively impacted them during various stages of doctoral studies, including the transition to independent researchers. Overwhelmingly, the theme of supportive relationships was one of the areas all the participants identified with on all levels: personal, professional, and intellectual. In particular, participants discussed in each individual experience how supportive relationships, such as family members, friends, fellow students, faculty advisers, and committee members, were instrumental to their experience of thriving during their doctoral programs. Although supportive relationships were vital in participants' experiences, supportive relationships did not perform the primary intellectual responsibilities required for the formation of doctoral students into scholars. Rather, the relationships the participants discussed served as sources of "encouragement," "strength," "guidance," and "support" as they navigated their doctoral journeys. For example, Abe, when discussing the nature of his transition experience, described the supportive role his family played in order for him to focus on his studies. He noted: "When you go to school [your family] goes to school with you as well in the sense that...okay you have your time to study...my wife is doing other things to keep the household running..." In this narrative, Abe related how his family supported him by ensuring he was not over-burdened with household related duties so he could focus on his academic works; that way, his family played a supportive role to ensure he thrives in his doctoral studies. Just as Abe described the necessity of the supportive role of his family, for many of the participants, it was difficult to imagine themselves thriving in their doctoral journeys without the influence of the people around them. Loretta, during her interview, spent a great deal of time

discussing her experience with supportive relationships in relation to doing her doctoral work. She expressed the following:

I don't know how you do without a support system or some type whatever it is, [when completing doctoral work]. Right now, I am in the process of the dissertation or the interviews. My parents, a couple of [my] friends have helped me as far as making sure that my son gets to where he is supposed to be, they have made meals when I had night classes. They were there to take care of my son, and just the support as far as knowing that I just need some encouragement right now, because I am feeling like I am drowning, and they would always be there to encourage me and tell me I can do this. And yeah, because you know in the program, I am sure there was times, like I gave up, I am done, I can't do this anymore, and they would always be the ones like, no you can [do this] and just to be a sounding board too because sometimes I would be frustrated or like I said, I didn't feel I knew the path of the program and they would always just listen to me.

For Thomas, the people he worked with were paramount to him getting resources and that was a huge support for him to thrive. He noted: "I feel pretty fortunate because of the people I am working with here [who] has been very supportive of me and so, I found in particular one person who's been kind of a resource for me... in addition to my advisor." What is truly remarkable is that other participants spoke about supportive relationships in a variety of spheres. For example, Albright's experience was grounded in the people she met and a supportive atmosphere she encountered at her school. She remarked: "In this four years [in my doctoral journey], I've learned something from each of the people that I [have] met. Being in a supportive environment, with supportive faculties and colleagues...helped me". In her reflection, Helen stated: "I had helpful advisers who were kind of the right balance in guiding me but letting me

make my own intellectual and academic decisions.” Williams also shares this view as he reflected on his doctoral program:

I have always been kind of afforded that type of level of sensitivity, sensibility, and you know, support and inspiration from the faculty that I have been able to interface with and have relationships with, and so, I think maybe it boils down to and a little twist, it is the relationships that I have with my faculty that let me move through the [doctoral] program.

Similarly, Suzanne in her experience, related how the good relationship she established with her advisor helped in her doctoral journey, she framed some other benefits of supportive relationships she experienced in this way:

The other things that really helped me along [in my doctoral studies] is that I had a good relationship with my advisor. I had some other friends who have finished the doctoral program and one who became my accountability person; he voluntarily checked up on me you know every month or two, to see how I was doing and that was very helpful [in my doctoral journey].

Megan drove over six hours every third weekend to attend classes, thereby providing compelling insights into the personal effort she committed to her doctoral studies. Still, while discussing her doctoral journey and her support experience she stated:

I credit a support team of family and friends and my colleagues and cohort members. You know, when we were in our orientation they said these people will help you through this and you will only understand that when you get done with the program, and it is very true, and you know, if I didn't have friends who would help me do somethings and you know, family will say come over for dinner quick and you can go back and finish your

homework. Just offering a quick meal or something, all of that has been very important to my success.

On the academic front, Celine related the following personal encounter about the support she received from a faculty member when she was in the process of commencing her dissertation. The faculty member pseudonym is utilized below to relate Celine's story:

Professor [Ben] has been really great! I had him for capstone; he really gave me the final direction for my dissertation because I was sort of struggling with how I was going to measure just what teachers do about bullying. So it turned into mindfulness of teachers and how they perceived that. So he really gave me that direction on that and where I should go with that. He is also fantastic with giving resources that I wasn't aware of. I mean, I had a few in mind, but he gave me a lot more and I never knew that he knew so much.

Another participant, Jennifer, who described herself as a self-directed learner and thought that "being alone with your own thoughts is very valuable." However, when describing how isolating the independent research process can be and how she utilized support system to deal with her isolation, she stated:

One of the things that I did do [to get past the isolation stage was] also, I actively [and] intentionally sought out connecting with peers and those people whose opinion I valued. The other thing I did is that for a while I scheduled a weekly meeting with my advisor, and no matter how much I had done—it might be there are three pages of a draft I have done, but I don't like this draft—could you look at this one and react to me. Here are the issues that I'm looking at right now, I need to focus let's talk about it. So I used that time with my advisor and then, I also have other colleagues and friends. I joined the American



Evaluation Association; I joined a professional organization that is the other thing I did to get past any kind of isolation. It not only provided a forum for me to interact with other people, but it gave me a chance to just look at and view some of the kind of discussions that are happening in the area that I am going to be doing research in.

For Evelyn and April supportive relationships were also impactful in their experience. In reflecting on her experience, Evelyn stated, “I will say my two committee members definitely impacted me because I relied on them for helping me answer questions and feedbacks.” April also reiterated the impart supportive relationships had in her doctoral experience. She noted:

When I also think that the skills going into [doctoral research] and having an advisor that I can trust to talk through it and a committee that I really, really, like. So, for me, a lot of it, the structure that I had, I felt like I really had a nice support system to be able to ask my questions about my research, about the process, about my methodology, how do I move through this and getting support from my committee.

Overall, in this theme, participants overwhelmingly related the overarching impact supportive relationships had on their experience of thriving during the transition to independent researchers. In particular, supportive relationships were experienced through family members, friends, fellow students, faculty advisers, and committee members.

### **Persistence**

The last emergent theme discussed in this study is persistence. The essence of this fourth theme describes how participants’ persistence led to their experience of thriving in their doctoral education, including during the transition to independent researchers. Persistence, in the doctoral education context, is the continuance of doctoral students towards the achievement of their educational goals despite challenges (Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). It is seen as a

factor of students' retention and success in higher education experience (Tino, 1993). In this study, participants' experienced persistence through their resilience and their motivations. At a first glance, persistence and resilience may seem the same term, because both ideas can contribute to success, but there is a distinction. While persistence can be described in terms of going forward in spite of the storm (challenges) to achieve a stated objective, resilience is the ability to withstand the storm. In this study, resilience describes one of the characteristics that allowed doctoral students to endure challenging circumstances to realize persistence. Thus, this trait is integral to persistence in the doctoral education context.

### ***Persistence through Resilience***

Resilience is the capacity to endure stressful or challenging circumstances (Zautra, et al., 2010). In thriving research, scholars describe resistance as a positive process of human adaptation to life circumstances. It also means a positive response to challenging life events (Carver, 1998). In this study, participants discussed challenging experiences they encountered during different phases of their doctoral education and in particular during the transition to independent researchers. However, despite the challenges participants experienced, the ability to be resilient, characterized by withstanding stressful situations, led to the attitude of persistence throughout their doctoral journey. While describing her doctoral education experience, Helen, stated:

Well [my Ph.D. program] was very stressful. Having a fulltime position and being a doctoral student was very demanding. [Also], I did have some struggles because my original adviser... left the university and took a job elsewhere. So, for me that sort of felt like starting from scratch. I had a certain new project that... I had to start working with someone else who I wasn't used to, so that part was a little bit difficult. I also had

difficulties... in the course completion stage which is a little maybe backward for some people. I think a lot of people do better in the courses and then struggle when it comes to dissertation work but I had a very demanding day job, so, having to go to a class at night was very hard ... it got very time consuming and it actually got easier when those sort of schedule time commitments fell away and I started doing my comp exams and my dissertation work where I could work on weekends or work over the Christmas break you know, where I had this bigger blocks of time [to work on my doctoral work].

As seen from the narrative above, despite the variety of challenges Helen encountered, her resilience resulted in her being able to not only positively endure, but also initiate ideas to withstand the challenges, which in turn, aided her persistence. For example, when Helen was confronted with time demands because of her fulltime position, she set aside a “bigger block of time” to address her doctoral work. Again, when her original adviser left her university and took a job elsewhere, she withstood the experience even if it meant starting her work all over again from scratch. Another participant, Suzanne related that many people experience life challenges when undergoing doctoral studies, during these challenges, some people give up, but for her she kept going:

I think many people go through a lot of life while they are doing their [doctoral] work. For me it was, to be honest, it was steady even though it took me four years to complete. It was fairly steady. I don't think there was a week that I didn't think about it and probably any two weeks that went by that I didn't continue to work on it. I never really fully put the work down you know, some others that I've talked to they might have something happen in their lives... they just get tired of it they put it away for a while and then a while becomes a long while and the longer they wait for it the more difficult it is to

come back to it; so for me I have always I mean, I carried my stuff with me almost everywhere I went and if I had a little bit of time I might bring it out and work on it.

Albright also discussed how she withstood the initial challenges she experienced in her doctoral journey to be resilient. She notes: “Being an international student by default you experience challenges [in the doctoral journey]... for me, the biggest challenge was the fact that I wasn’t self-confident in my abilities.” However, with time, effort, patience, Albright now remarked “feeling very comfortable” and eventually growing to develop confidence. For Evelyn, when asked about her dissertation research experience, she leaned back in her chair and took a deep breath before stating, “Hmm, challenging! I would tell you it is very challenging, and I am a very motivated driven person, so it is not that I wasn’t.” Evelyn further elaborated that her dissertation research experience was challenging because it was unstructured and she was less accountable in the process. She thinks there is less accountability in the research process because of lack of deadlines or benchmarks for students’ completion. This lack of structure and less accountability is problematic for doctoral students on both the individual and programmatic levels. Notwithstanding, to thrive and navigate this challenge, Evelyn discussed how she had to create deadlines for herself, as well as hold herself accountable by requesting to meet with her advisor weekly. Now that Evelyn has completed her dissertation work, she remarked: “As an educator myself as I look back at the process and I keep thinking how can the process be better?” Similarly, April, who recently defended her dissertation, also discuss a similar experience about the challenges in the independent dissertation research. She noted: “It was scary and so for me, it was terrifying, like, I know that I have to do this [research] on my own and yet I don’t know what I don’t know about the research process.” In Abe’s research experience, his challenge was the experience of isolation in the process. He comments, “As I transitioned to this sort of past

portfolio stage and became ABD that has been difficult. It's been difficult in the sense that I am on my own." In addition, Abe discussed his overall doctoral education experience and talked about the difficulty he encountered as he transitioned past the portfolio stage of his program because he felt he was on his own following the completion of coursework. He could have decided to quit just as many doctoral students who experience attrition (Lovitts, 2001). But, he willingly withstood the difficulty of isolation, and by being resilient, led to his ability to persist. Obviously, the capacity to withstand challenges by being resilient in the learning context pushes doctoral students to move forward in the different stage doctoral of education. This ability to withstand and move forward is what extends and translates resilience into persistence. Again, April noted:

The dissertation requires consistence and then you just persevere through it and then having the courage to own it...So, perseverance really is like just pushing through it. [Because during my dissertation] I felt like this is never going to be done and it was exhausting and so pushing through that and then I just kept telling myself you would be fine you would get through this, this is okay, this is part of the process, this is how you learn...

At a metacognitive level, April's experience discussed through her reflective statement reveals a cognitive lens to the participant's experience of being resilience. In April's case, she had to mentally process positively verbalizing her resilience approach when she was feeling exhausted while undergoing her dissertation. She stated, "I just kept telling myself you would be fine you would get through this..." Her positive mental words eventually created the focus for her to attain resilience and move forward (persistence). Megan, seems to support April's perspective by stating, "I think there is a lot of that intrinsic motivation and resilience that reside

in the individual”. In other words, resilience residing in the individual suggests a cognitive personality trait. Furthermore, in going back and forth to make sense of the study data, the experiences of being resilient were indeed a key ability find that helped participants preserve and experience thriving during their doctoral studies, especially during the transition to independent researchers. Given the role of resilience in persistence, Loretta, remarked, “[as a doctoral student] you have to have pure determination and resilience and not be willing to give up.” In this sense, part of the traits of resilience that translate into perseverance is not being willing to give up. The following comment by Jenifer is also instructive:

Part of the [doctoral experience] is learning that things take time, be patient with yourself and others, but keep moving. The process of doing independent research isn't just the product, the end product. It is a whole process. It is supposed to be not easy, it is supposed to be challenging. So, recognizing that and taking advantage of that to do, let's say, some critical reflections... and learn from the process.

Challenges are part of doctoral students' experience when seeking an advanced degree. For those who withstand the challenges to develop resilience are indeed transformed to move forward to realize persistence as seen in participants' experience. This was evident in Suzanne's doctoral experience by her sharing a personal loss that she endured as she described the challenges she thought many doctoral students encounter in different circumstance. She remarks:

We probably have other things in our lives and during eight years that I was a student you know just life happens. So, I think that certainly is a challenge, to be able to keep going when you know in my case my brother passed away in the time I was doing my doctoral program. So that personal piece was a challenge at times.

Overall, the challenges that Suzanne and other participants shared in this study that doctoral students may encounter in their doctoral journey can be summarized to include: (a) time constraints as busy adults, (b) feelings of isolation because of lack of intellectual interaction with learning communities, (c) a lack of confidence as novice or first-time researchers, (d) a lack of understanding of the entirety of research process, (e) the unstructured nature of the independent dissertation research and (e) the challenges of life events or situations that may occur during doctoral education experience. As mentioned earlier, an aspect of resilience, is the ability to withstand challenges. Participants related through their shared experiences how they withstood some of the enumerated challenges in their doctoral journey to realized persistence. Indeed, by being resilient, participants were able to persist and through the process experienced thriving in their doctoral learning context.

### ***Persistence through Motivation***

The motivation of participants is another significant consideration that contributed to the persistence of participants in this study. Within this context, financial incentive, family background and support, and not quitting as a mission of value, were discussed as the motivational drive that influenced participant's persistence to thrive during the transition to independent researchers. Wlodkowski (1995) stated that motivation is the natural human drive that directs the pursuit of a goal. Motivation is often mentioned in the literature as an important factor for graduate student retention and success (Bair and Haworth, 1999; Gardner, 2009, Lovitts, 2001). For example, Knowles (1984) postulated the idea that adult learners approach learning situations with motivation. In addition, Gardner (2009) asserted that motivation influences learning and doctoral students' drive to persist with graduate studies. In relation to the

theme of persistence through motivation, participants discussed how their various motivations contributed to their persistence.

One motivation that several participants mentioned was financial in nature. For example, Evelyn expressed the view that she experienced challenges in her doctoral education, especially during her dissertation research process that was stressful as a result of the unstructured nature of the research process. However, Evelyn related persisting because of her motivation to get done as a result of the financial incentive she will receive from her job upon completion. Thus, the financial incentive was the catalyst for her motivation to persist in graduate school. She remarked: “Well my job, my salary, you know if I get done...I then can put in for promotion which is... an extra three thousand dollars every year. So basically, incentive.” Evelyn in her story was essentially saying despite the challenges she experienced during her dissertation research, one of the motivations for her persistence was largely tied to financial incentive. Loretta also supported this position that financial incentive is part of her motivation for persisting and pursuing doctoral education. She discussed that earning the doctorate degree will increase her earning power to support her family. She notes, “I knew that completing my doctoral degree will help financially”. Williams also seconded that financial benefits somewhat plays a part in the motivation that leads to persistence in graduate school. He stated:

I would be surprised to hear somebody say that the idea of having a higher earning potential is completely off the table when it comes to getting [an] advanced degree. Like, I just want to argue that now; I might be completely wrong, who knows? But, you know, that is like, ... somebody is going to become a medical doctor and they say, the money is not even an issue, like, come on, it is a little bit right! And, yeah of course, I don't think that takes away from the fact that you wanna help people for a living... you wanna be



doing good things, but, I think to completely say that and this is coming from me right, like, for me to say that I don't assume that there is a chance now of a higher earning potential with the Ph.D., I be lying to you. You know what I mean. So, there is that piece [of higher earning potential].

Clearly, Williams acknowledges that financial considerations play a role in the motivation to persist in doctoral education. Although, Megan and Jennifer disagree with this position in their experience. For example, Megan stated that her decision to pursue the doctorate was not to “earn more money”; rather, it was to gain more expertise and become better at her job. She remarked:

First and foremost, my personal interest was just to be better at my job that is why I wanted to do my Ph.D. It wasn't necessarily to earn more money, it wasn't to obtain a certain position and so it was really to just become better at what I was doing. So that motivation to just do better was there and I didn't know how to learn more about my job or expand my knowledge about higher education...without going back for more education.

Though Megan and Williams's perspective seems to be at odds about financial considerations as a motivation to engage in doctoral studies, the difference in their opinions may actually be a matter of individual situation and context. However, many of the participants in this study associate part of their motivation to financial incentives.

Family background and support were other important aspects that motivated participants to persist. In this sense, some participants discussed how wanting to support their family and the expectation from their family contributed to their persistence in graduate school. For instance, Loretta discussed experiencing many challenges as a doctoral student and as a single mom.

However, she mentioned that the challenges pushed her “outside [her] comfort zone” and motivated her to persist. Loretta continued the discussion by stating that she was willing to persist and “do whatever it takes” to excel in graduate school because one of the main reasons she was pursuing her Ph.D. education stemmed from the motivation to support her family. She noted: “I have a family I have to support and I knew that completing my doctoral degree will help financially.” Thus, her motivation to support her family influenced the pursuit of an advanced degree and in the process promoted her persistence. Megan discussed a similar motive by stating that among other reasons, part of the motivation for persisting in her doctoral studies is her personal pride and the pride of her family. She comments, “I owe it to myself to complete as well as, and you know, my family.” In Williams’ experience, he related that his motivations to persist in doctoral studies is driven by his family background as a first-generation student. Second, he has a desire to break the glass ceiling in his ancestral community because he hasn’t seen anyone from the country his parents migrated from to the United States that “has a doctorate.” Thus, Williams’ motivation to persist in doctoral studies was deeply rooted and personal. In addition, Williams also discussed that his motivation to persist in graduate school was a mechanism to correct the stereotypes in the society about minorities who are sometimes portrayed in derogatory manners. In this sense, Williams’ motivation to persist in graduate school can also be seen from a social justice perspective. A concept that speaks to fairness and equality in the society. Within this context, Williams perceives that persisting in doctoral studies is a way to change the stereotypes in the society about minorities. He elaborates:

To show that we [minorities] are not just the statistical negativities right, that a person of color is not just a gang member, a criminal... a detriment to the society; that when you hear the word a refugee is not about this money that they are coming to take that this job

they are coming to take like all these [negatives] you know that we equate with; you know, persons of color, and refugees, etc. So that is essentially putting the exclamation point on what I was saying, when I say, well there is really no option for me to beside to finish.

As seen from Williams' experience, many factors conditioned participants' motivation to persist in graduate school. In the same light, motivation was also central to their realization of persistence. Having motivation did not mean participants never experienced challenges in graduate school, rather, their motivations was the drive that allowed them to persist. Since motivation is associated with persistence in graduate school experience, it will be intriguing to discover how to elicit sustained motivation of doctoral students throughout their doctoral journey in order to foster continuous thriving.

Not quitting is the final motivational drive discussed in this study that influences participants' persistence to thrive during the transition to independent researchers. By way of definition, not quitting is a figurative expression derived from the data that describes how most participants discussed their proactive motivational intent that allowed them to be persistent in their doctoral journeys. In other words, not quitting was a motivational mission statement that guided participants' persistence in their doctoral experience. Many of the participants interviewed discussed their overall intent of not quitting as they navigated the various stages of their doctoral studies and in particular the independent research process. Specifically, while there were many motivations that contributed to participants' persistence, their early decision, even before beginning their doctoral programs, not to quit was a proactive motivating step in their development of persistence. For example, Suzanne, Megan, and Abe described their approach to

doctoral experience in terms of having a guiding motto and a grounding mission for persisting in their doctoral education experience. In this regard, Suzanne remarked,

Once I had made that decision [to pursue a doctoral program], then my motto became “quitting is not an option.” Because I knew so many people who started the program and never finished and I did not want to be that person...I was going to make the decision to do it; that was going to be my motto. I think that helped me a lot.

Unarguably, as seen in Suzanne’s remarks, her guiding motto, “quitting is not an option,” was a motivational force that influenced her persistence in her doctoral journey. She related that it took her many years to decide to pursue a Ph.D., and once she started she was motivated to persist. Although not explicitly stated, her remarks indicate that, despite the challenges she may have experienced, she was prepared to persist in the doctoral experience. Megan also related a similar experience regarding her motivational decision to persist. She noted,

I decided to begin my doctoral studies because I have found myself in higher education, and it was through previous employment that I really got into education...Intrinsically, I came into this [doctoral] program wanting to complete it.” .... if I am going to start this, then I am not going to not finish it; like, I am going to finish.

Megan used definite statements such as, “I came into to this program wanting to complete it” and “I am going to finish” to convey a message of not quitting as a strong motivation to persist in her doctoral experience. In addition, Megan’s motivation to persist is evident by one of the earlier experiences mentioned in her introduction: she drove six hours to attend class on some weekends. In essence, the motivation to commute that far to attend classes demonstrates a proactive mindset of not quitting. On the whole, the decision not to quit was

found to have impacted how Megan and other participants were motivated to persist in their doctoral studies.

Furthermore, other participants commented on how their resolve of not quitting became a grounding voice of mission that motivated them to persist as they navigated their doctoral journey. As a result of this proactive intent of not quitting, success in their doctoral studies became a reality for participants. For example, Williams noted,

As an individual thinker, my state of mind [for exploring doctoral studies] is really is no option! Like I can't fail; I have to finish this. I have to finish the work. I have spent the greater part of my existence in schooling and so I haven't stopped. And you know frankly, and this may sound kind of harsh, like, I have been in school for so long...I think that if I don't get the PhD, it would be like it won't make any sense. So, obviously, I think am motivated enough and hungry enough to continue.

Loretta, in relating her experience when she was feeling exhausted from her dissertation process, stated, "It never was an option for me. I am going to get done unless the Lord takes me home before then I am going to do it. I have to, yeah." These remarks showed the participants' intent not only reflected a proactive motivational disposition, but also signaled a strong resolve to not quit that eventually resulted in steady persistence. This resolve also promoted a clear intent of purpose in terms of their overall mission. Thus, having a firm intent not to quit contributed to participants' persistence as they navigated the rigorous work involved in doctoral education.

In conclusion, the decision not to quit was a driving motivational force that directed participants' work toward meaning and focus. As such, no matter what happened in their life experience, not quitting was the preferred option to undergo doctoral education. This support the current understanding that persistence promotes student retention and success in the educational

experience (Gardner, 2009). However, the extent as to how not quitting as a motivational force translates into the overall process of thriving in doctoral education is unknown. The participants in this study clearly defined one aspect of their motivation as not quitting and that helped them realize their purpose. On the whole, participants' resilience and motivations were found to be instrumental to the development and demonstration of persistence, which in turn led to the participants' experience of thriving in their doctoral journey.

Thus far in this study, the current chapter related the experiences and narratives that describe how education doctoral students and graduates in the study thrive as they navigate the transition to independent researchers. This thriving is a multi-faceted concept that speaks to how doctoral students positively function in their graduate educational context. Through the discussed experiences, meaningful comments, and statements of participants, I was able to describe the positive characteristics, behavioral patterns, responses, and actions that resulted to participants' experience of thriving during the doctoral learning research context. In particular, four emergent themes overall described how participants positively functioned to thrive in their independent doctoral dissertation research context: a) digging-in, b) commitment, c) supportive relationships, and d) persistence. These four themes revealed that thriving in the education doctoral research context is shaped by a multiplicity of factors. These factors could be categorized into both personality traits and support systems as discussed in Chapter Five.

Chapter Five, the next chapter, is the final section of this study and concludes with a discussion on the connection of the study findings and the conceptual framework, as well as the study research questions. Then, recommendations are proffered based on meaningful insights derived from the participants who shared their experiences of navigating doctoral studies and conducting independent dissertation research.

## **CHAPTER 5. INSIGHTS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

According to Schreiner (2015), “Meaning-making is at the heart of all learning. It is through our attempts to make sense of the world around us that we are able to navigate the challenges of life” (p. 263). Similarly, to make meaning of the overall premise of this study, this concluding chapter discusses the emergent themes in connection with the conceptual framework, the literature, and the research questions. Then, implications and some recommendations are offered for further research. The recommendations are based on overall knowledge from the study, as well as insights gained from the participants who shared their experiences and perceptions about their transitions to independent researchers.

The main research question examined in this study was: What are the experiences that allow education doctoral students and graduates to thrive as they navigate the transition to independent researchers? A conceptual and theoretical framework that consists of 10 aspects of thriving was developed to inform the study (Figures 1 & 2). Twelve participants, four doctoral graduates and eight active doctoral candidates in the discipline of education in two Midwest research universities, participated in a semi-structured interview conversation that resulted in the data utilized for this study. Through the analysis of data and a three-stage coding process, four emergent themes were identified in the study that provided understanding and meaningful insights on how education doctoral students and graduates tend to thrive as they navigate the doctoral dissertation research. The emergent themes are discussed in connection with the study conceptual framework to make meaning of the various elements that shape the phenomenon of thriving in the doctoral education context.

## Study Emergent Themes in Connection to Conceptual Model

Four themes emerged from the analysis of data in this study: a) digging-in, b) commitment, c) supportive relationships, and d) persistence. These four themes conveyed the idea that thriving in the education doctoral research context is shaped by a multiplicity of factors. These factors could be categorized into both personality dispositions and support system factors, as discussed towards the end of this chapter. In addition, these four themes corresponded with four of the ten aspects of thriving that were utilized to inform the study conceptual framework. The four corresponding themes are highlighted in the conceptual framework below.

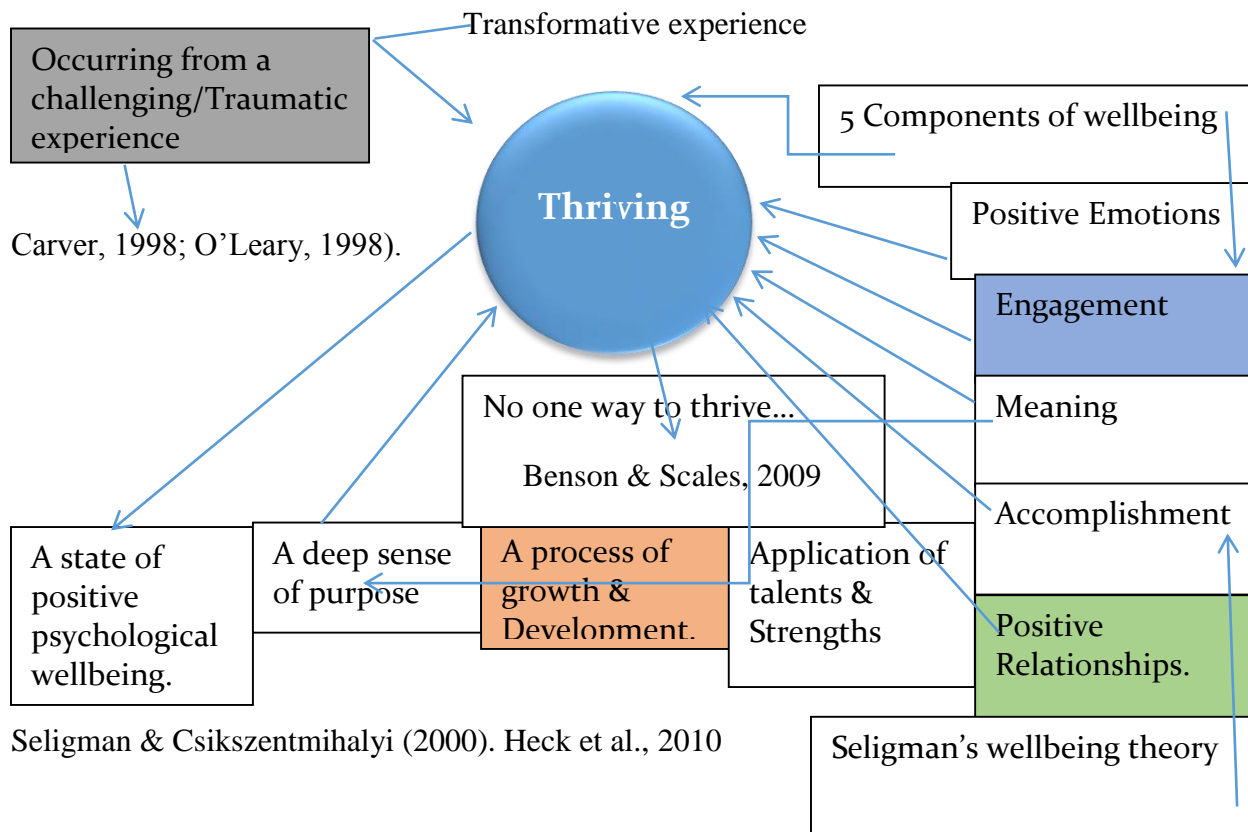


Figure 3. Highlighted corresponding themes. Corresponding themes highlighted in the study conceptual framework.

The other six aspects of thriving in the conceptual framework appeared in the data, but according to the data analysis, they were not featured enough to emerge as full-fledged themes



and as a result, they were regarded as lesser themes. However, although these lesser themes of the conceptual framework were not reflected directly in the emergent themes, they were still relevant to the experience of thriving because some of the participants alluded to these aspects of thriving in their individual experiences. This confirms what Feeney & Collins (2015) articulated, that thriving is best described in relative terms rather than absolute terms. In other words, thriving is neither a fixed experience nor an all-or-none outcome (Feeney & Collins, 2015; Ryff, 1989). It is a progressive concept that is experienced in a variety of human well-being contexts.

The emergent themes in this study add to the body of knowledge and understanding that there is no one way to thrive. Indeed, a variety of constructs contribute to thriving in its experienced context. Put differently, thriving can be diversely realized and experienced. For example, digging-in is one of the study's themes that describes how participants positively approach intellectual learning at a deep level to experience thriving. Persistence, another theme, was utilized by participants to respond to the challenges encountered during the doctoral experience. Both ideas demonstrate the multiplicity of forms in which doctoral students could experience thriving. Thus, within the context of this study and the data analysis, the emergent themes constitute major lessons and experiences that overtly influenced participants' experiences of thriving in their doctoral research. The results offer a useful explanation for understanding the variety of elements that shape thriving in the doctoral learning context.

The first emergent theme of digging-in is a figurative expression that describes how doctoral students and graduates in the study approached doctoral learning in an effective manner that facilitated their academic growth and development to experience thriving during the transition to independent researchers. This theme of digging-in was instrumental in helping participants become curious, independent learners who spent enormous amount of time studying

and making connections with others in a bid to seek out new knowledge. This participant action conforms to the idea that “Doctoral students, although certainly capable and talented adults, are nevertheless still students. They seek the knowledge, skills, and habits of mind particular to their specific field of study” (Gardner, 2009, p.7). Participants demonstrated through digging-in their desire to seek knowledge that is relevant to their learning. This approach of seeking knowledge was beneficial to participants as it helped them develop and advance in their chosen areas to fulfill doctoral learning expectations. Through digging-in, participants were able to exemplify how doctoral students can evolve in learning dispositions to experience thriving in their intellectual adventures by applying self-directed learning, learning with others, and love for learning. Thus, digging-in brings to the forefront the indispensable role of the learner in doctoral learning situations. As observed by Walker et al. (2008), there are aspects of doctoral education that faculty must convey to students in the learning process; however, there are other aspects that students must shape and direct themselves, especially in the sphere of intellectual development and professional identity. In addition, Walker et al. (2008) believes that exploring the intellectual landscape in terms of the depth of knowledge and paradigms in the disciplines should be the goal of every doctoral student who wishes to thrive. Contrarily, many doctoral students in education come to graduate school as busy and fulltime adult workers (Gardner, 2009); the result in some cases is the inability to fully prepare and meet the extensive learning expectation in graduate school as some participants indicated in the study. For example, Loretta said, “For me, I wasn’t prepared for the amount of work that I thought it was going to be, so I understand when people go ABD and don’t finish. [It is] because of the work, it is so much work!” In other instances, many doctoral students do not realize the intensity of the learning involved and are unsure of the depth of digging-in required of potential scholars. April referred to this lack of understanding as

“you don’t know what you don’t know.” What Loretta and April are implying is that there is a lot of digging-in that takes place at the graduate level. When doctoral students are not prepared for this experience or may not know what is expected it can be difficult to thrive in such situations. At the program level, some doctoral programs may not stress or emphasize enough to students the extent of the rigorous learning required from start to finish during doctoral education. This can implicitly affect how students approach digging-in. For example, Suzanne while describing her doctoral experience stated,

My adviser, he had said at one point, when I finished the [dissertation] proposal that the hard part was over. And it was downhill all the way, but I didn’t find that to be true. So, in my mind, I had this idea from him that okay, now it is going to be easier, and it wasn’t easier. It was a lot of work to finish, to actually do the research.

Suzanne continued her story by relating that it got to a point in the school session that she realized her doctoral work was not going to be completed at her anticipated semester. She eventually spent an extra semester to complete her doctoral studies. It would have been better for Suzanne to know that a comprehensive learning approach is required from start to finish in her doctoral learning process; perhaps this knowledge would have mentally prepared her better for a deep level of learning. Notwithstanding that some doctoral programs may not emphasize enough to students the extent of the rigorous learning expectations required to succeed, on the brighter side, this study reveals that for doctoral students who thrive, digging-in is an integral part of their intellectual learning experience as related by participants. Thus, both current and future doctoral students will benefit from proactive knowledge about the high level of digging-in that takes place in doctoral studies. In addition, participants recognized that digging-in is a process that elicits growth, so being willing to consistently engage in the process is critical to success. Thomas

commented, “I’ve really seen, since being done with the coursework and now the transition into my own exploring...that learning is a process and it just is being willing to engage in that [process] regularly and consistently that’s worthwhile.”

In comparison, digging-in as a theme connects with the growth and development aspect of this study conceptual framework (Figure, 3). It relates to the framework in the sense that growth and development explain how people evolve and acquire the knowledge to thrive in the process. Lerner and Overton (2008) postulated that thriving is a process of development that describes how people positively evolve to thrive throughout their lifespans. In this sense, digging-in relates to how participants grow to thrive in the intellectual learning experience. In addition, Ryff (1989) stated that when individuals thrive, they grow in significant ways that reflect enhanced self-knowledge and effectiveness. In other words, thriving is a process that reflects effectiveness and progress in learning dispositions. Spreitzer et al. (2005) also asserted that when people thrive, they experience a sense of learning and vitality that leads to personal and intellectual growth. In comparison, digging-in is one of the core ways participants expressed experiencing intellectual growth and improvement in their learning. This growth enabled them to thrive in the doctoral dissertation research context. For example, April looked back at her doctoral experience and related how she never understood what conceptual and theoretical frameworks were in a research context. With regard to digging-in, after an extensive period of study and conversation with her advisory committee members, she finally understood, showing an intellectual understanding in utilizing conceptual and theoretical frameworks in her research. In one of her remarks she noted, “I never knew what... the theoretical or conceptual framework was and it took me a long time to, like, really start to grasp it.”

Likewise, many other participants in this study attributed their growth towards meeting the doctoral learning expectations to their ability and effort to engage in digging-in. Suzanne discussed how she learned a lot when she first started her doctoral program during the coursework stage. Because of the knowledge she gained by virtue of digging-in, she developed to the point that when she got to the independent research stage of her doctoral program, she had the resources to effectively conduct independent research. Similarly, growth and development as features of thriving also describe the process of improvement along an optimal positive direction (Benson & Scales, 2009). This growth and development shows the advancement people make on their path towards thriving. Thus, digging-in in connection to growth and development strengthens this study by reiterating that doctoral students who curiously engage in deep intellectual learning and take active roles for their intellectual development, whether by investing a significant amount of time studying or making connections with others in the learning community, as genuine seekers of knowledge will grow to fulfill doctoral learning expectations and thrive in the process.

The second theme of commitment resonates with the engagement aspect of the study's conceptual framework. The rationale for this connection is seen in the proximity between commitment and engagement. In addition, both concepts are multidimensional concepts that are interchangeably used in many circumstances. Similarly, commitment and engagement exhibit some common traits, such as involvement, dedication, determination, and attachment to the realization of a given objective. In this study, commitment centered on the dedication and sacrifices participants demonstrated through various levels of engagement in their doctoral learning context that allowed them to experience thriving. As previously mentioned, participants related that the time, personal effort, money, and energy they committed to their doctoral

learning process helped them to realize success. As earlier related in Chapter Four, Thomas noted:

Going through the [doctoral] program while having, trying, to have a career and having a family, it's just been immense. The time requirements and the sacrifices that I've had to give in one or both of the other areas with family and work in order to try to do well in school.

Thomas statement reflects a high level of commitment to a doctoral program in which he dedicated his time and made personal sacrifices to meet the obligations of graduate school in order to thrive. This approach to doctoral studies was also expressed by other participants who discussed committing enormous time and energy into the doctoral process to actualize their doctoral educational goals. In addition, doctoral students investing time, energy, and finances into their doctoral education was a similar pattern and a prevalent trait (commitment) many adapted to experience thriving in graduate school. Megan, in reflecting on some of the lows and high points of her doctoral education journey, stated that the decision to seek a doctoral degree should not be taken lightly given the commitment it requires. Megan's statements reiterate the relevance of commitment that stems from personal experience and realizations. Also, Suzanne looked back on her doctoral experience and remarked that the commitment required in doctoral education "is a long-term commitment," and because she realized this obligation in her experience, she was constantly working on her project. Although, as important as commitment may seem, many doctoral students who are already busy adults, can find it challenging, for a variety of reasons, to be totally committed to doctoral learning and in some cases slowly withdraw from their programs after some years (Lovitts, 2001). Fundamentally, the comments by Megan and Suzanne convey the thought that commitment is an essential trait that should be

significantly considered when anticipating involvement in doctoral studies. As noted by Walker et al. (2008), doctoral education is not just a static educational experience, but rather a learning environment driven by purpose and commitment. Their statement suggests being a doctoral student is not just about wanting the degree or the title, rather, doctoral preparation entails a deep set of obligations and commitment to fulfill the intellectual learning needs. In addition, Schreiner (2013) observed that commitment leads to a significant level of engaged learning that, in turn, translates to students thriving. In other words, when students are committed, they earnestly engage in deep learning and that results in their experiences of thriving.

Relatedly, the conceptual framework in this study discussed engagement as a concept similar to how commitment could be realized: being immersed, dedicated, and productive and being intentionally absorbed in a given context to achieve intended goals. This idea is also supported by Schreiner (2013), who stated that when students commit a significant amount of time and effort into their learning process, there is a stronger possibility of achieving desired educational goals. Interestingly, some participants during their interviews described entering doctoral programs without realizing the intensity and commitment it requires, but as they progressed it became clear to them that without a firm commitment it was difficult navigating the doctoral journey, especially during the post-coursework phase. For example, Thomas related how he had to develop scholarly habits of setting milestones for himself in order to progress. Thus, findings from this study and the conceptual framework establish a consensus that doctoral students can experience thriving in their learning context from purposeful commitment. However, students must also be aware that the doctoral journey is a demanding enterprise that requires many sacrifices and constant commitment. Given this reality, the willingness to put

forth sustained effort to excel in the doctoral learning context should be an integral consideration in order for students to thrive.

The third theme of supportive relationships correlates with the positive relationships aspect of the conceptual framework. By definition, supportive relationships describe the positive interpersonal experiences education doctoral students and graduates in this study encountered that contributed to their experience of thriving. As previously presented, participants related encounters of how supportive relationships, such as family members, close friends, fellow students, faculty advisers, and committee members, were integral to their experiences of thriving in their doctoral programs. Although these supportive relationships were expressed as impactful to participants' experiences, the supportive relationships did not perform the actual intellectual responsibilities required from doctoral students to advance as potential scholars; rather, the supportive relationships, were sources of "encouragement," "strength," "guidance," and "support" as participants navigated their doctoral journeys. A significant understanding derived from this theme was that all the participants expressed the view that without supportive relationships, they could not imagine themselves thriving in their doctoral journeys. For example, Loretta discussed how her family was of immense support in her doctoral journey. She related how they exhibited their support of her by carrying out supportive functions on her behalf as she pursued her doctoral studies. Some of these functions included making meals for her son when she had night classes and being a source of encouragement to her when she was overwhelmed and wanted to give up. In the final analysis, Loretta attributed all supportive functions she experienced as significant contributors to the realization of her educational goals and her doctoral thriving experience. She noted: "I don't know how you do without a support system or some type whatever it is" [when completing doctoral work].



Loretta's statement regarding supportive relationships suggest thriving in the doctoral learning context is not an isolated individual sequestered experience, but an experience promoted by interpersonal relationships. In connection with the conceptual framework, supportive relationships addressed as positive relationships were also seen to be valuable to thriving human experience. According to Seligman (2011), the influence of positive people in one's life matters. As a result, the pursuit of key relationships and human connection is fundamental to well-being. In the doctoral learning environment, the extent of relationships and sense of social connection that exists for graduate students can facilitate doctoral student thriving. As emphasized by Gardner (2009), the relationships students develop with faculty members, especially student advisors, are integral to doctoral student success in graduate school. In the long term, faculty and advisor relationships not only contribute to student learning and success, but also they promote future professional development opportunities (Gardner, 2009). Building on this perspective, doctoral students can experience thriving by developing meaningful relationships in their doctoral journey. Thus, it is important for future and current doctoral students to develop meaningful supportive relationships with faculty, advisors, and colleagues, as well as family and friends, in their doctoral journey (Gardner, 2009).

The final theme discussed in this study is persistence. It is linked to thriving through the challenging experience aspect of the conceptual framework. In conceptualizing the phenomenon of thriving the emphasis is mostly placed on the positives, thereby ignoring the reality that many life circumstances that result in thriving do not solely emanate from positive incidences. Rather, they also occur from adverse and challenging circumstances. This idea was captured in developing the conceptual framework of this study, where one of the lenses through which thriving was articulated stipulated that thriving can result from adverse and challenging

experiences (Figure 3). Relatedly, the theme of persistence is connected to the aspect of thriving through the challenging experiences piece of this study's conceptual framework. It is comparable because there is a strong connection between overcoming challenges and persistence in graduate school. In this regard, participants, through overcoming challenges in their doctoral journey, were able to persist and experience thriving despite the challenges they encountered. In other words, the ability for study participants to persist through challenges reflects that thriving can result from difficult circumstances. As stated by Seligman (2011), thriving is not the absence of challenges; rather, it is the presence of positive characteristics. From this perspective, it is understood that when students thrive, it is not because they have not experienced challenges. Rather they have applied and utilized positive characteristics to navigate the challenging circumstance.

In an earlier study, Carver (1998) noted that although thriving is a positive concept, thriving can result from negative and challenging experiences. Similarly, study participants had a multiplicity of challenging experiences that they effectively navigated that led to their thriving as doctoral students. For instance, Helen, in reflecting on her doctoral experience, discussed the challenges of having to start her research project over again because her doctoral faculty advisor was hired by another university. Suzanne related losing her brother during her doctoral program, but overcame that adverse life event to achieve her educational goals. Thomas discussed the difficulties he experienced having to work, maintain a career, and raise a family while studying at the same time. As a result, he had to make many personal sacrifices in several aspects of his life. These experiences provided a glimpse into what doctoral students could encounter in their doctoral journeys. The experiences also demonstrate that challenge is part and parcel of doctoral students' learning experiences. Thriving is realized in the learning context, when a doctoral

student persists through the challenges positively. In the literature, persistence is a characteristic of student success and program retention (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). In addition, the ability to persist and to rise above challenges connects to the experience of thriving.

Likewise, participants' experiences indicated that students sometimes emerge from difficult circumstances with capabilities to get through their challenges. In this regard, most would also agree that persistence is vital in overcoming challenges in the doctoral learning context. Overall, participants' actions and responses with regard to the persistent theme and the study's conceptual framework convey the idea that thriving can indeed occur in the doctoral learning experience through overcoming challenges.

Other aspects of the conceptual framework that did not emerge as themes, but were reflected in participants' experiences of thriving included: thriving as a state of psychological well-being; having a deep sense of purpose; application of talents and strengths; positive emotions; meaning; and accomplishment. As briefly stated in the conceptual framework, thriving is a state of psychological well-being that describes a cognitive condition that allows people to function optimally and derive satisfaction with their lives (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In comparison, this definition suggests doctoral students' cognitive condition is an essential provision for the experience of thriving. Although not explicitly stated, some participants shared experiences that reflected an aspect of cognitive functioning that allowed them to thrive in their doctoral experience. In particular, April related how she felt "somewhat alone in the mental building-up process" leading to her dissertation experience because she worked full-time and did not have a "huge community" to interact with after her coursework. As a result, she was feeling alone and inadequately prepared for her dissertation experience. However, she related that the cognitive process of thinking positively and encouraging reflective self-thoughts enabled her to

maintain a psychological condition that allowed her to function effectively during her independent dissertation research experience. In one of her comments, she noted, “I just kept telling myself you would be fine. You would get through this; this is okay. This is part of the process, this how you learn... and getting through that anxiety.” April’s experience was one of the few instances in which participants explicitly related how their cognitive state allowed them to function well in their doctoral learning context.

Having a deep sense of purpose was another of the aspects of the conceptual framework that did not emerge as a full-fledged theme, but was still relevant to the experience of thriving. This aspect describes the intrinsic concept of finding meaning and reason for doing what one does. Abe discussed this concept of a deep sense of purpose as an idea that had not only been impactful in his doctoral experience, but also as the biggest change that enabled him to learn to plan, reflect on what he was engaged in, and take decisive actions. He noted:

I think the biggest change [in pursuing doctoral education] is, I've become more purposeful... so I have had to say, well here is what I am shooting for, I need to not just plan my days ahead, I need to plan months ahead. It's kind of immersed this project and my purposefulness is to get this damn thing done in my life and make a plan to finish it. Because no one forced me to do it but research doesn't just research itself, it takes people like us to get in there and really understand it and know the right ways to go about making sense and being purposeful about that process. So, I think overall the biggest change [I have experience in doctoral education] is an increase level of purposefulness.

Abe’s comments showed that he recognized the value of being purposeful in the doctoral experience. As being purposeful has helped him to learn how to plan and gain improve understanding on why he is engaged in learning. This understanding, when followed through

with intentional actions, then result in the experience of thriving. Fundamentally, the literature mentions that students who thrive in their educational experience have a deep essence of purpose that fosters their productivity and retention to make the best of their academic experiences, irrespective of life events (Berea, Tsvetovat, Daun-Barnett, Greenwald, & Cox, 2015; Schreiner, 2013). In fact, one definition in the literature describes thriving as intentional drive that shapes purposeful development across several of life domains, such as academic, social, and professional to achieve a positive purpose (Heck, et al., 2010). This perspective suggests that for students to thrive in the doctoral education research context, there must be a clear, underlying rationale, accompanying a positive attitude towards achieving the desired academic goal.

In regard to the other lesser themes, such as the application of talents and strengths, positive emotions, meaning, and accomplishment, some participants discussed utilizing a combination of these concepts in their individual experiences. They applied these concepts by developing and improving their abilities, acting on their passions, recognizing the worth of being a doctoral student and realizing what their academic achievement may mean to them. Overall, these elements of the conceptual framework were reflected in participants' experiences although not directly in the emergent themes. However, the elements were still relevant to the experience of thriving because of their positive connotations and some participants' experiences. These lesser themes, found to be relevant in the experience of thriving, should not be surprising, given that doctoral students' thriving is not necessarily a linear or one-size-fits-all experience (Schreiner, 2013). Participants conveyed that thriving in the doctoral learning context is experienced through a multiplicity of factors. Some of the factors may be prevalent as seen in the emergent themes, while others may vary across individual experiences. In all, the findings in this study and ideas discussed in the conceptual framework established connections between the

many elements that shape the experiences of thriving in the doctoral learning context. Thus, doctoral students can maximize their potential to thrive in their doctoral journeys by developing and positively adapting these characteristics.

### **Exploring the Research Questions**

The first research question that guided this study was, “What were education doctoral students’ and graduates’ experiences as they transitioned from being students to independent researchers?” This research question explores experiences that helped education doctoral students thrive during their transition to independent researchers. Thriving, the conceptual framework utilized for the study, focuses on positive aspects of human experiences, as well as interactions and behavioral responses that lead to positive functioning and outcomes in human context (Benson & Scales, 2009; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In this regard, a variety of positive concepts were explored to conceptualize thriving in the doctoral learning context.

The experiences that allow education doctoral students to thrive are not easily quantified given the complex nature of individual and social circumstances. However, the literature points out that experience is a significant aspect of learner’s education. In this sense, Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) observed, “we learn from experience in a variety of ways” (p. 159). In other words, experience shapes the fundamental process of learning in several ways. Experience has also been perceived as the greatest resource in higher learning, especially across adult learners, who also consist of doctoral students. Knowles (1984) postulated that adults come into educational activities with a greater sense and variety of experiences. These variety of experiences can be “a rich resource for learning” in the graduate school learning context (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 84).

Drawing from the literature and participant experiences in this study, human experiences were seen to be valuable and indispensable to the construction of knowledge, especially from a constructivist epistemology (Cohen et al., 2011). Thus, given that experience is crucial for understanding how people encounter and make sense of the world they live-in, this study explores the experiences that allowed education doctoral students and graduates to thrive during their transition to independent researchers. In this study, four major findings – (digging-in, commitment, supportive relationships, and persistence – provided insight for understanding the series of dispositions and experiences that allowed participants to thrive during these transitions.

In addition, participants' experiences not only provided insights into how education doctoral students and graduates in the study may encounter the thriving phenomenon, but they also revealed how participants positively responded to their experiences, which is the focus of thriving. The ideas from this study were also supported by the literature and the conceptual framework. While some of the participants' experiences were pleasant, such as cultivating love for learning, other experiences, such as facing isolation in the independent research process, were challenging. As a result, participants described applying positive strategies to overcome challenges in their doctoral education experiences. The participants' duality of experiences reflects the multiple dimensional nature of thriving (Benson & Scales, 2009). Thus, this study provides an understanding that thriving in doctoral learning context is not a linear or a onetime episodic event; instead, it is a multi-faceted concept that arises from both difficult and pleasant circumstances. Indeed, participants' experiences demonstrated this multi-faceted nature of thriving. In addition, most of the participants mentioned that their ability to think deeply, write, and learn new skills have been developed as a result of their doctoral experiences. They also mentioned that they became more "purposeful," "analytical," and "confident" in their abilities as

a result of their experiences in pursuing a doctoral education. Some of these experiences, although challenging, helped students to develop the ability to overcome barriers and to thrive in their learning experiences.

Interestingly, the main purpose of doctoral education is to prepare scholars to shape the future in a variety of areas (Walker et al., 2008). Unfortunately, when doctoral students come into doctoral programs they quickly discover that the preparation to become scholars is not an easy process for a variety of reasons, such as coming from a different background into a field of study, lack of independent research experience, an intensive learning environment, time constraints, and personal commitments (Gardner, 2009). These experiences were also true for participants in this study. Thus, the emergent themes in the study addressed some of the major ways participants positively responded to their doctoral experience to realize the needed preparation of scholars. For example, the act of digging-in was discovered to enhance the academic growth of students in doctoral programs to function optimally and attain success in graduate school. This idea is comparable to the growth and development definitions of thriving discussed in the study's conceptual framework. Thus, when a doctoral student evolves through the experience of digging-in, such a student will function optimally. In other words, digging-in in graduate school allows doctoral students to experience increased knowledge, develop new skills and dispositions to function optimally in the doctoral education experience. Therefore, it will serve doctoral students well to adopt creative ways to incorporate digging-in into their overall graduate school trajectory to realize a positive experience.

Furthermore, the experience of commitment was another theme that showed how participants positively responded to the scholarly demands of doctoral education. Advanced degrees, such the doctorate, come with many responsibilities, obligations, and a significant



amount of commitment to achieve intended educational goals. This is difficult for many doctoral students who already have many responsibilities and, in some cases, other demanding roles as adults. In addition, some of the stages, such as the independent research dissertation in doctoral education are unstructured, and as a result, it is difficult to navigate the doctoral journey without proper commitment. This was true in the experience of Megan, who believed, “The decision to seek a Ph.D. should not be taken lightly” because of the inherent commitments it requires.” For participants in this study, commitment was realized through various levels of engagement that included the investment of time, effort, energy, emotions, financial resources, and logistical resources in the doctoral learning process. This was not easy for participants who had multiple responsibilities and had to make sacrifices in order to achieve their doctoral educational goals. The direct implication learned from participants’ experiences through commitment was that potential and current doctoral students who wish to thrive in their educational experience should prepare to make several sacrifices in many areas to realize their educational goals. In addition, while commitment is a vital response to having a thriving educational experience, participants discussed that setting deadlines, prioritizing their time, and developing habits helped them progress academically and was useful to realize commitment in the doctoral research process. As discussed before, commitment through engagement is associated with productivity. Overall, commitment is found to be a significant aspect of the doctoral learning process, because students who lack commitment may find it difficult to dedicate the time and resources needed to thrive in the doctoral learning process. These findings posit that doctoral students can thrive in their doctoral educational experiences by owning the process and taking personal responsibility for their own educations; that responsibility begins with a firm commitment to thrive irrespective of life odds.

The second research question explored in this study was, “What was the influence of relationships and acquaintances during the transition to independent researchers?” This research question focused on the positive role that relationships and acquaintances played in the experience of doctoral student thriving. Feeney and Collins (2015) asserts that meaningful and close relationships play a fundamental role in humans thriving. As such, people who have experienced more supportive and fulfilling relationships with others have better outcomes in many areas of life. In the graduate school experience, relationships providing support are undeniably crucial to the overall success of graduate students (Gardner, 2009). This idea is also consistent with the literature and one of the themes (positive relationships) in this study’s conceptual framework. Seligman (2011) stated that little or nothing could be achieved in life without key relationships. Key relationships in this regard are healthy interactions and connections developed with other people in the social cultural environment (Haight et al., 2002). Seligman (2011) further compared not having positive relationships to loneliness which he thought is a disabling and alienating condition in human experience. On the other hand, the pursuit and sustenance of supportive relationships is key to well-being, life satisfaction, as well as thriving (Seligman, 2011). In addition, Schreiner (2013) noted that thriving is incomplete without positive relationships.

Similarly, for participants in this study, healthy relationships and acquaintances developed with people in a variety of contexts were paramount to their experience of thriving in doctoral education. For example, Suzanne notes, “I had a good relationship with my advisor...and that was very helpful.” April stated, “My husband was there. Without that support... it is hard to imagine doing it [doctoral research].” Loretta said, “I have reached out to students that were either a year ahead of me or have graduated. They were very helpful in my

success of the doctoral program.” Thomas also affirmed the importance of relationships in the doctoral learning experiences: “I feel pretty fortunate because the people I am working with here have been very supportive.” As stated earlier, many of the participants when discussing the influence of their relationships and acquaintances believed that without the supportive role of their relationships and acquaintances, they could not have imagined themselves thriving in their doctoral education and, in particular, in their independent research context. This knowledge is compelling and outstanding because it emphasizes the influence of social networks and connections in the doctoral learning context. To paraphrase Haight et al. (2002), throughout life there is a constant interaction between people and each of these human interaction influences the individual. For example, at birth children need parents to provide an enabling environment for thriving. During adulthood humans interact with family members; these exchanges have either negative or positive impacts on the individual. Likewise, central to the idea of thriving in relation to the influence of supportive relationships and acquaintances in this study were the contributions of family members. Many of the participants talked about how family members were a source of encouragement and performed supportive tasks to enable them focus on their studies throughout the doctoral educational experience. All of these functions combined allowed participants to thrive. On the surface, the influence of family members to a doctoral student’s thriving in the learning context may appear trivial or minimal, since obtaining the doctoral degree can be conceived as an erudite or collegiate focused responsibility. Contrary to this notion, for the participants in this study, the support of family was integral to the experience of thriving in their learning contexts. This idea of family support as integral to graduate student thriving is crucial because it gives credence to a source of strength and value that may be

considered a non-academic factor, yet family support is vital to the doctoral student's experience of thriving.

Another integral aspect in which participants experienced supportive relationships and acquaintances during their transition to independent researchers was the relationships developed with fellow students. Participants in this study discussed how they learned so much from interactions with fellow students. Although there is not much in-depth research that extensively focuses on the impact of fellow students' interaction in doctoral education, the literature does mention that the relationships with fellow students are imperative to attaining success in doctoral education (Flores-Scott & Nerad, 2012). For example, Gardner (2007) suggested that doctoral students can mutually benefit from learning together, particularly during the independent stage when the doctoral experience seems isolating. In addition, Walker et al. (2008) stated that students' interactions can result in intellectual engagement, formation of professional identity, and collaborative learning encounters. Similarly, many of the participants in this study mentioned that fellow students with whom they interacted with were a huge influence on their supportive relationships experience in graduate school. Fellow students also helped in the realization of a safe learning space and of a community learning environment, even though, in many doctoral programs there is no formal structure to connect doctoral students to one another outside their coursework. Nevertheless, doctoral programs and students can work to bridge this gap to create opportunities for students to constantly build meaningful relationships through the promotion of formal and informal forums. This is significant given the stated relevance of student- to-student interaction in the doctoral learning experience.

As meaningful as the relationships and acquaintances with fellow students are to doctoral students, the relationships and acquaintances of faculty members and advisors were also found to

play a very significant role in the experience of student thriving in the doctoral education context. In the literature, the nature of the relationship between doctoral students and faculty members, especially advisors, has been promoted as very important to graduate students. In this regard, Gardner (2009) wrote that good faculty relationships over time contribute not only to student learning, but also to graduate student socialization and professional futures. Socialization in this context is the process through which doctoral students learn the norms, values, skills, and attitudes needed to grow in the intellectual community (Gardner, 2005). Clearly, graduate students as new-comers in the intellectual community need good relationships to foster their socialization experience. As discussed in the literature review section, the relationships with faculty, especially advisors, are a vital component of doctoral education composition and culture. This relationship between advisors and graduate students is consistent with the apprenticeship model of doctoral education (Walker et al., 2008). Thus, it was not surprising when participants in this study confirmed that they experienced a positive impact from their supportive relationships with faculty members and their advisors. These findings about the impact of the relationships established with faculty members, especially advisors, reinforced that doctoral students need to build positive connections with faculty members throughout their doctoral education journeys. While it is true that the relationships with faculty members and advisors produce immense benefits that can result in doctoral students thriving, it is worth re-emphasizing that relationships with faculty members and advisors work best when there is a strong student motivation to learn coupled with an informed and inspired faculty mentor who guides the intellectual process (Golde and Walker, 2006).

Overall, the experiences shared by participants and the knowledge from the literature suggest that doctoral students should be encouraged to seek and develop meaningful

relationships early in their graduate studies. In addition, having positive relationships is one lens in the study's conceptual framework that articulates the experience of thriving. Thus, experiencing supportive relationships in graduate school is relevant on many fronts to students' thriving. For example, doctoral students in education and related disciplines may experience a community environment during the coursework stage, but noticeably less so during the transition to independent researchers. As such, many doctoral students could benefit from developing supportive relationships when navigating the research process as first-time researchers. Also, doctoral students need supportive relationships when experiencing isolation and personal difficulties in graduate school. Overall, because supportive relationships are crucial to the doctoral student experience of thriving, the need to address how doctoral students can cultivate quality relationships that foster thriving is an area that calls for further inquiry.

The third research question explored "How did participants experience moments of transformation during the transition to independent researchers?" This research question focused on the challenges students transcend that shaped their experience of thriving in the doctoral education context. In the literature, thriving is a multidimensional concept mostly portrayed in positive terms. This was also evident in most of the elements of thriving explored in this study's conceptual framework, except for the aspect of thriving through a transformative or challenging experience (Figure 3). In the participants' description of their experiences, there are instances that showed thriving can be experienced through challenging or traumatic experiences. Yet, in the literature, there is little emphasis on experiencing thriving through negative circumstances; rather much of the emphasis is on thriving as both emanating and resulting from positive experiences. However, there are strong indications people can thrive through and from negative or challenging experiences. Notwithstanding this gap, O'Leary and Ickovics (1995) stated that

thriving is a valued human response, and wherein challenges provide opportunity for positive adaptation, which results in thriving. In addition, positive concepts such as strength and wisdom associated with thriving also emerge from adversity and struggles (Colby & Damon, 1992). In other words, the experience of adversity and challenge in a given context can lead to a transformative experience that eventually culminates in thriving (Benson & Scales, 2009; Carver, 1998, Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). Hence, Benson & Scales (2009) articulated that people who thrive may face challenges, normal bumps in the road, failures, and unusual crises that transform them. In addition, Carver (1998) stated that challenges may bring about positive outcomes that promote quality functioning in humans.

These assertions are in accord with some of the participants' experience in this study. April, in particular, shared how she became a better student regarding the quality of her work following the challenges she experienced during her dissertation process. April discussed the difficulties towards the end of her doctoral program when she did not fully comprehend the dissertation research process; this resulted in the "hardest" difficulty of "mental transitioning" to a new researcher. She began to be overwhelmed by the terrifying process of having to do independent research alone for the first time. April reflected on this experience, saying that she experienced "major, major, transitional changes" during this transition to becoming an independent researcher. Looking back on this experience, she remarked, "I feel really good about my project, I feel good about what I did, I feel really good about what I learned and the quality of my writing." Drawing from April's experience, it is clear that challenges in some instances can lead to a higher functioning level, the development of new skills, and the knowledge of how to approach problematic situations.

In relation to doctoral education research about thriving, there are limited studies that explore thriving in response to challenges. However, challenges are part and parcel of doctoral students' experience (Gardner, 2009). The fact that challenges are not unusual in the doctoral experience can be seen in Celine's description of the graduate school. She remarks, "Graduate school is tough. It is a lot of work. It is a lot of thinking, it is a lot of money, [and] it is a lot of time invested". Certainly, being a doctoral student is tough; it is not an easy experience. If it were, everyone would obtain a Ph.D. (Gardner, 2005). More so, the conceptualization of the doctoral education enterprise is described through the daunting context of a "complex formation process," given the difficulties students may experience in their doctoral journey (Walker et al., 2008, p. 8).

Notwithstanding the toughness of graduate school, the connection observed between challenges and thriving in the doctoral education context is evident in the sense that when students were confronted with challenging experiences, participants, instead of quitting, persisted and navigated the challenges through positive response patterns as articulated in the study's findings. This response to challenges invariably resulted in their experiences of thriving. Thus, the process of experiencing and positively overcoming the toughness of graduate school is what brings about thriving outcomes. Important to note is that the experience of thriving may begin with a difficult situation. This was reflected well in the study as participants discussed several challenges they encountered that provided insights into their transformative thriving experience. For example, Helen related how she struggled because her original program adviser left the university and took a job elsewhere. This resulted in her starting over again from scratch. Helen's challenging experience of switching advisor is not peculiar to her alone; Megan also experienced a similar challenging fate. She noted,



There are some organizational and personnel changes... that directly impacted my study. For example, I now have an adviser who is my third adviser. So, I have not been recently working with the same adviser and that has been one of a bit of a bump in the road [doctoral education] and so that has been difficult.

Indeed, having to change an advisor three times can be overwhelming and frustrating. However, changing an advisor is not the only difficulty graduate students may experience while undergoing their doctoral journeys. A variety of challenges abound in graduate school and in the lives of doctoral students (Gardner, 2009). What leads to the experience of thriving are not the challenges themselves, but the response pattern or coping mechanisms students adopt to navigate the challenges. As noted by Schreiner et al. (2012), the behavioral dispositions, skills, and character strengths students adopt in response to tough situations are essential to thriving. This was reflected overwhelmingly in the experience of participants in this study. For example, Albright experienced the challenge of initially feeling inadequate in her doctoral journey, in what may often be described as the imposter syndrome. She noted:

I always consider that my writing was not good enough for publishing. So, yeah, I think as an international [student], and again maybe this is not something that's all doctoral students' experience, but as an international student I was always afraid that I am not good enough for this program.

The sense that one is not good enough can be very demeaning and self-defeating in the doctoral journey; it results in a lack of confidence (Keefer, 2015).

Obviously, doctoral students encounter many challenges in graduate school. Yet, challenges not only abound in graduate school, but also extend to the personal lives of doctoral students as they experience the difficulties of meeting the requirements of life and doctoral

education expectations (Walker et al., 2008). These challenges, in essence, speak to the ontological reality of the doctoral experience. The direct implication for prospective and current doctoral students is that the doctoral experience is not always going to be a rosy experience. There will be many bridges to cross. As a result, thriving in graduate school lies in the ability for doctoral students to develop and adopt positive coping responses towards navigating the challenges they may encounter in their learning experiences. In addition, thriving also lies in being proactive and recognizing that success can emerge through seeing the opportunity that lie in those challenges. This idea of seeing the opportunity that lie in challenges is a proactive insight, comparable to what Jennifer describes as overcoming the “tyranny of the immediate.” Jennifer used this expression the “tyranny of the immediate” to described the necessity to rise above what is “right in your face” to see the bigger picture when experiencing challenges. In other words, rising above the immediate challenges in graduate school as a student to see the bigger picture.

Furthermore, the challenges participants transcended in their doctoral journeys could be summarized to include: the feeling of imposter syndrome; time constraints; changing of advisor; isolation; lack of a community environment; inadequate understanding of the research process; lack of deadlines after coursework is finished; and non-accountability in the dissertation process. These challenges were indicators of obstacles to which participants applied this study’s major thematic findings of digging-in, commitment, supportive relationships, and persistence to overcome. Overall, the participants' experiences suggested that thriving in doctoral programs could be attained through positive responses to challenges. Thus, the recognition that adversity can elicit thriving through adopting a positive response to challenges provides a novel context

within which to understand doctoral students thriving experiences during the transition to independent researchers.

The final research question explores how education doctoral students and graduates in this study utilized their natural talents and personal strengths during the transition to independent researchers. As stated in the closing section of the literature review, natural talents are innate abilities that foster productivity and excellence, while strengths are developed abilities and characteristics that allows people to excel in their given context (Clifton & Harter, 2003; Schreiner, 2014). Similarly, this research question examined the natural and developed abilities that participants' utilized in their experience of thriving during the transition to independent researchers. Clifton & Harter (2003) observe that individuals gain more in the learning context when they utilize their talents and strengths. This perspective also collaborates Clifton and Harter's (2003) perspective that people who act on their talents and strengths are more likely to thrive. A similar assertion was stated by Schreiner (2013) who articulated that the identification, development, and application of strengths results in thriving in the higher education experience.

Relatedly, a strengths-based approach to life context was a lens through which thriving was conceptualized in this study's conceptual framework. While participants did not specifically mention any talents or developed abilities they possessed that enabled them to thrive during the transition to independent researchers, it was nevertheless apparent that they applied some abilities in their doctoral studies that enabled them to thrive. In fact, three of this study's emergent themes (digging-in, commitment, and persistence) were personality dispositions of strengths that facilitated the experience of thriving in participants' doctoral journeys. For example, some participants discussed during their interviews how, among many other abilities, analytical skills, organizational skills, interpersonal relationship skills, and writing skills

contributed to their experiences of thriving during their transitions to independent researchers. Analytical skills are primarily the ability for doctoral students to critically examine and question the nature of reality (knowledge). This occurs as students in doctoral programs learn the habits of the mind to function as scholars (Gardner, Hayes, & Neider, 2007). As students become familiar with these expectations, the ability to analyze written literature, for example, is a useful asset for thriving in the doctoral learning context. For instance, Jennifer stated that because of her doctoral experience, she developed her abilities “to critically read and analyze academic literature, always wanting to understand more about the methodology and the statistical analyses that they might put in an article.” Albright had a similar experience; because of the knowledge she gained in her doctoral program, she related that she became more “analytical.” She recognized that this was a useful strength for her as she conducted independent research:

Well, [because of my doctoral experience] I am more analytical. Let's say that each time that I do something, I think in terms of research: what could I do out of this, how could I frame this. Even with my own dissertation study, I have a complex amount of data... I started being more analytic and [the] more I think, I think more as a researcher, you know ... what could I explore, and what should I do? I'm thinking more analytically in that sense, and I think, I'm more curious as a person, as a scholar, as a researcher; like each time I do something, I see the potential of a research study...

Drawing from these participant experiences, the ability to analyze is an integral strength for doctoral students. It increases their problem solving potential and their ability to de-construct ideas in a meaningful manner.

Organizational skill was another strength some of the participants related to in this study. Despite Megan's statement that trying “to be a bit more organized” did not work for her,

especially when setting daily reading goals, nevertheless she also discussed how setting aside Saturdays to write was a fruitful exercise in her doctoral journey. She states, “I like to take a Saturday and sit down with some coffee and write for a whole day. I’ve have found [strength and get] better that way.” Organizational skill in the doctoral experience is marked by the ability for doctoral students to structure and manage their doctoral experiences to achieve success, especially during the independent research stage when doctoral education seems unstructured (Gardner, 2009). For example, Thomas stated that after completing coursework in his Ph.D. program, he discovered there were no “schedule deadlines.” He had to learn to organize himself and create his own deadlines to be able to move forward. Helen also shared a similar experience of how she was having difficulties beginning her dissertation and what helped her was the ability to organize herself.

Following the completion of coursework, the transition to independent researcher is marked by the doctoral dissertation. Typical of this period, doctoral student organizational strengths are put to the test because of the unstructured nature of the doctoral research dissertation. Creating deadlines is one way that doctoral students must organize themselves in their efforts to thrive throughout their doctoral journey trajectory. This exercise is a major asset in moving forward throughout doctoral studies, especially during the transition to independent researchers. Indeed, this period provides a significant opportunity for doctoral students to utilize organizational skills and create the structures for thriving. After all, in many ways the learning of skills and adoption of values needed to function as a scholar are the underlying premises for undertaking the doctoral studies in the first place. As indicated in Thomas and Helen experiences, organizational ability was a strength that contributed to their thriving experience.

This idea aligns with one of the concepts in the conceptual framework and the literature stating that maximizing students' strengths and talents are useful in the educational experience.

Furthermore, how organizational abilities are applied will vary according to individual students, so much so that some doctoral students may not conceive of themselves as "organized." Yet they still exhibit organizational abilities as demonstrated in Megan's experience, when she did not see herself as organized, but related setting aside a day of the week to work on her doctoral study projects. In reality, one cannot complete doctoral learning expectations without some application of organizational strategies. Overall, organizational skill is an ability a doctoral student may crave try to develop for navigating doctoral studies. Among other potential benefits, organizational skills can help doctoral students address the unstructured part of doctoral education, such as the independent research dissertation.

Interpersonal relationship skills, or the ability to connect with others was another strength participants utilized in their experiences of thriving during the transition to independent researchers. Thomas notes,

Both my advisor and the peers here at my work, have been important for me...if I didn't develop a relationship with either of them that would be very difficult. So just having people who have gone through the process, who can give me advice and sometimes hold me accountable to some of my self-imposed deadlines has been helpful.

As discussed in Chapter 4, the second research question centers on the influence of relationships on doctoral students' experiences of thriving. Similarly, some participants mentioned interpersonal relationship experiences as one of the strengths they developed and utilized in their doctoral journey. For example, Loretta, while describing some of the experiences

that helped her effectively navigate her doctoral journey, discussed the impact of her ability to reach out to others by stating the following:

I have reached out to students that were either a year ahead of me or have graduated.

They were very helpful...and then, there was a couple of the professors that I reached out to constantly...The students...gave me the timeline...They are the ones that told me about possibly doing independent study...that's how the students have helped. As far as the professors, it was more answering questions that I had that I felt the students couldn't fulfill. They were pretty good at directing me... this is the path to do this, you need to do that...I really had to search them out.

The ability to connect and interact with others is a necessary skill required in and outside the academia (Gardner, 2009). It was not surprising when Loretta acknowledged that one skill that helped in her doctoral journey was the ability to reach out to others. Jennifer also seems to agree with this perspective when she stated: "One of the things that I did do also, I...intentionally sought out connecting with peers and those people whose opinion I valued." In other words, she "intentionally invited people to contribute" to her doctoral learning experience.

The final talent and strength discussed was writing ability. Writing ability is a general requirement to undergo doctoral education, especially in the discipline of education. Surprisingly, not every doctoral student is gifted in the nuance of academic writing (Graff & Birkenstein, 2014). As such, the ability to write with clarity and conceptual focus are major strengths students develop in navigating the doctoral process. For example, the idea of writing the independent research dissertation that many of the participants in this study have described as challenging and terrifying because of its many complexities. On the other hand, writing was identified as a strength participants developed as they wrote their research project. Gardner

(2009) observed that because of the significance of writing in doctoral studies, there are numerous articles and textbooks offering advice to doctoral students about academic writing. Truly, the idea of writing, especially writing the doctoral dissertation, may be easier because of this literature on writing. An in-depth look at each study participant's experience showed an obvious fundamental difference between reading about writing in graduate school and the actual practical experience of carrying out the writing act. This suggests that writing is a strength learned, practiced, and developed over time. In addition, writing in graduate school is not a perfect experience, it is craft-developed practice. In a nutshell, graduate students writing skills will improve significantly by practicing consistent writing. In this study, participant experiences suggested that consistent writing is an ability learned and refined through the dissertation experience. When describing some of the strengths he had developed in graduate school, Thomas noted,

I've learned [about] my writing and how to translate those ideas onto paper. I guess [it] is definitely a big step in learning the academic writing, the quality of it [and] the style of it. So I can be at the appropriate level, it is something I continue to work on.

Clearly, there is no perfection in writing in graduate school, but as Thomas observes, there is an "appropriate level" of writing expected of doctoral students. This basic understanding should inform how graduate students develop their strengths and approach their doctoral educational experiences. Overall, the development of academic writing skills was a strength found to foster participants' experiences of thriving in the doctoral education context.

The prevailing research questions discussed so far provided relevant information that describes desirable characteristics and influences that shape participants' experiences of thriving during their transition to independent researchers. Furthermore, through the research questions,



this study connected, and made sense of, the various elements participants discussed that contributed to their thriving. As reflected in the literature, thriving defines the constructive interactions and responses that lead to positive functioning and outcomes in human experiences (Benson & Scales, 2009). The findings in this study also reflected some of the effective interactions and responses that lead to positive functioning in the doctoral learning experience. These findings are not absolute or the only outright way to thriving. However, fundamental in the doctoral learning process, the findings in this study stands out and will facilitate doctoral students thriving. For instance, digging-in was instrumental in developing learning competencies that informed the intellectual growth and development of participants. In this regard, students who intentionally engage in digging-in will experience a significant level of intellectual development as potential scholars.

### **Further Insights and Discussions**

Understanding what allows education doctoral students and graduates to thrive during the transition to independent researchers was the primary focus of this study. While the study recognized that not all doctoral students will become researchers after graduation, inherent in graduate school experience is the expectation of independent dissertation research that marked the transition from students, who primarily consume knowledge, to independent scholars, who contribute to knowledge (Lovitts, 2008). Thus, this study explored how participants thrived in their doctoral research experience.

The concept of thriving was the guiding framework for this study. In the literature, there are diverse definitions and conceptualization for thriving. One lens of thriving adopted for this study stipulates that thriving is a multi-faceted construct that describes positive human functioning and development (Benson & Scales, 2009). In other words, thriving focuses on how

humans positively function in their context, such as the doctoral education context. This study explored both the scholarly literature and the participants' lived experiences to describe what contribute to thriving during the transition to independent researchers. The findings that emerged from the semi-structured interview conversations correspond with the lens through which thriving was discussed. The findings reveal a combination of four major dispositional attributes contribute to education doctoral students' experiences of thriving during their development into independent researchers. These dispositional attributes can be further categorized into personal characteristics and support systems factors. Both factors can be best described in term of a *thriving continuum*. The personal characteristics consist of dispositions such as digging-in, commitment, and persistence. These dispositions represented the personal factors of the thriving continuum and speak to the abilities and characteristics doctoral students applied in their experiences that helped them thrive in meeting educational goals. The support systems factor of the thriving continuum was characterized by supportive relationships and acquaintances of academic and non-academic networks that were a source of strength and encouragement in the doctoral learning process. This support system factor included family members, fellow students, faculty members, and advisors.

One significant idea this study contributes to thriving in the doctoral learning context is that thriving is experience in a continuum. The personal dispositions stated above were one aspect that told the thriving continuum story in the study. Therefore, it is crucial to emphasize that while personal dispositions are of value in the doctoral learning context, thriving goes beyond personality attributes to include personal support systems. As the participants' experiences in this study indicated, people reach their major objectives by working with, around, and through other people. Importantly, people cannot thrive without supportive relationships

(Feeney & Collins, 2015; Schreiner, 2013). In this sense, support systems describe supportive relationships that contributed to the thriving experience of study participants.

Thus, in the doctoral learning context thriving is realized through a combination of individual and social factors. As indicated in this study, participants experienced thriving through both personality dispositions and supportive relationships. This gives credence to the idea that for doctoral students to thrive in their research context, they need to apply both personal dispositions and support systems connections. Each factor is important and affects the other in a doctoral students' experience. Not only do doctoral students need to develop and apply their personal dispositions to achieve their educational goals, they must also associate and interact with others who provide a source of strength and influence. Overall, both personal dispositions and support systems constituted the thriving continuum in this study. Indeed, both dispositions also shaped participants' experiences of thriving in the doctoral learning context. Thus, doctoral students could thrive by cultivating and adopting these dispositions in their doctoral research experience.

### **Thriving: Implications for Practice**

The emergent themes of digging-in, supportive relationships, commitment, and persistence overwhelmingly represented how education doctoral students and graduates in this study experienced thriving during the transition to independent researchers. The study did not anticipate these themes. Nevertheless, these themes overwhelmingly represented how participants in this study effectively navigated their doctoral journeys to experience thriving. The participants' experiences in this study corroborates existing literature that there is no one way to thrive. Schreiner (2013) perceived thriving as a holistic process of students' successful outcomes. Clearly, this perspective on thriving seems to be true when considered in the doctoral education

context because it takes many holistic dimensions for doctoral students to thrive. Based on participants' experiences, this study identified both personal dispositions and support system factors, in terms of healthy relationships, as influential in students thriving in the doctoral education experience. This knowledge implies that aspiring and current doctoral students could thrive in their doctoral educational pursuits by striving to explore and continuously strengthen their personal dispositions to approach graduate education positively. For example, resilience, one of the concepts discussed in this study and described as an elusive force (Haight et al., 2002), could make a difference in the manner doctoral students positively respond to challenges and still persist to thrive in their experiences in graduate school. Thus, understanding how personal dispositions can positively contribute to the experience of thriving in graduate school can be a first step in developing qualities to attain success in doctoral education. Also, developing personal attributes allows doctoral students to manage and take responsibility for their own learning, given the self-directed learning required in the doctoral education process.

Support systems is the other aspect of the thriving continuum in the study. It is significant to note that many of the participants concluded that they could not see themselves as thriving without some form of support systems in terms of their relationships. The literature also points out that thriving is incomplete without meaningful relationships (Schreiner, 2013). Again, in the second research question, the connection of doctoral students thriving through supportive relationships was comprehensively established. Furthermore, support systems illuminate supportive relationships in the doctoral experience and occur on a variety of levels. They also expand beyond the academic community (Baker & Pifer, 2011). For example, Suzanne related how a close friend provided support for her as an accountability partner, so she was able to navigate the unstructured part of the doctoral dissertation process. Thus, it is in the best interest

for doctoral students to develop meaningful relationships throughout their doctoral journeys to provide them with the relevant support, which will promote their experience of thriving in the process of doctoral education.

Although most of the ideas addressed in this study focus on doctoral students' thriving, it is also clear that doctoral education program policymakers have a significant role in facilitating doctoral students' thriving in their programs. As a result, at the programmatic level, doctoral programs could do more to help mentor students to recognize how their personality dispositions and support systems, including that of faculty, can contribute to their educational experience of thriving. Also, doctoral program administrators and policymakers could set up doctoral students to thrive by providing a formal support structure to students, especially during the transition to independent doctoral dissertation research, which many acknowledge as challenging (Lovitts, 2008). If these components of thriving are purposefully addressed, the overall success of doctoral students to thrive could be positively impacted.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

In many ways, the topic of thriving is very essential in doctoral education and it is a broad area of emerging research that cannot be exhausted in a single study. As a result, this study is explorative in that it serves to create the opportunity for further exploration into many aspects of student thriving and successful doctoral programs. The sample population utilized for this study was limited, and as such, the population target for future studies of this nature could be expanded to determine if similar ideas will emerge from a wider sample. In addition, given that this current study was conducted utilizing target samples from two research universities, future studies could include a number of universities from different regions throughout the United

States. Future research could also explore thriving of doctoral students from disciplines other than education.

Furthermore, this study explores what allows education students and graduates to thrive, thereby selecting a purposive sample of students who seemed to be thriving, given that thriving can occur both from positive and negative experiences as discussed in the study. It is suggested that in the future, samples could be diversified to include both those students who seem to thrive and those students who do not seem to thrive. This would open the door to questions that examine what prevents doctoral students from thriving.

Finally, this study explores only the perceptions and experiences of doctoral students. Future research could examine thriving at the programmatic level to determine for example, how doctoral programs can facilitate doctoral students' thriving. Stakeholders, such as faculty members and advisors who deals with students on a regular basis, could also be a focus of extensive thriving research given the significant role faculty members and advisors in doctoral student thriving.

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## **APPENDIX A. RESEARCH INVITATION INTERVIEW**

Dear Education Doctoral Students & Graduates:

I am contacting you because you are associated with a doctoral program in education at either North Dakota State University or the University of North Dakota. You are invited to participate in this study if you are: (1) a current doctoral student in any education field who has completed all requirements except dissertation (ABD), or (2) a recent doctoral graduate from any field of education within the past two years. I am conducting interviews as part of a dissertation research study that examines the perceptions of education doctoral students and graduates during the transition to independent researchers.

As someone who has recently graduated or is currently working on your dissertation, you are in a position to share your perceptions about the transition to being an independent researcher. Participation will comprise of an in-depth interview conversation and interaction. The in-depth interview will last between 55-120 minutes and participation is completely voluntarily. If you are interested in participating, please contact me Simeon Edosomwan at 7016309616 or [Simeon.Edosomwan@ndsu.edu](mailto:Simeon.Edosomwan@ndsu.edu). I will get in touch with you to describe the study, arrange our meeting location and answer any question you may have. You can also contact my advisor Dr. Claudette Peterson, at 701-231-7085 or [Claudette.Peterson@ndsu.edu](mailto:Claudette.Peterson@ndsu.edu) for any details.

Thank you for your time and for participating in this dissertation research.

## **APPENDIX B. RESEARCH PARTICIPATION CONSENT LETTER**

Dear Research Participant:

My name is Simeon O. Edosomwan. I am a doctoral candidate in the school of education at North Dakota State University (NDSU). I am conducting a dissertation research with my advisor Dr. Claudette Peterson. The dissertation examines the perceptions of education doctoral students and recent graduates as you transition to being able to conduct independent research. The knowledge gained through this study may help education doctoral students and policy makers develop proactive initiatives to improve the experience of doctoral students.

You are invited to participate in this study because you a current doctoral student in an education field and have completed all requirements except dissertation (ABD), or a recent doctoral graduate from any field of education within the past two years. You will be one of approximately 20-30 education doctoral students or graduates that will be involved in an in-depth interview conversation about your experiences during the transition to independent researchers. The interview questions will be open-ended and are designed to help explore your thoughts, reflections and perceptions about your experiences as a graduate student in education. The in-depth interview will vary in length, but are not anticipated to last more than 120 minutes. If you consent to participate in the study, I will schedule a time and location most convenient and comfortable to you for a face-face in depth interview. The in-depth interview will be audio recorded and your responses will remain anonymous and all identifiable records will be kept private. In addition, the information obtained from the interviews will be kept locked in a safe place only accessible by the researcher. The interviews will also be transcribed and analyzed for emerging themes, these themes will then be interpreted and described, and my findings will be

included in written form as part of my doctoral dissertation. The transcribed transcript will be made available to you for you to check for accuracy.

Your participation in this study is valuable, however, it is completely voluntary and you may decline or withdraw from participation in the study at any time without penalty.

If you are willing to participate or have any questions about this study, please contact me at 701-630-9616 or Simeon.Edosomwan@ndsu.edu. You may also contact my advisor Dr. Claudette Peterson, at 701-231-7085 or Claudette.Peterson@ndsu.edu. In addition, you have rights as a research participant. If you have questions about your rights or complaints about this research, you may talk to the researcher or contact the NDSU Human Research Protection Program at 701.231.8995, toll-free at 1-855-800-6717, by email at ndsu.irb@ndsu.edu, or by mail at: NDSU HRPP Office, NDSU Dept. 4000, P.O. Box 6050, Fargo, ND 58108-6050.

Please sign below indicating you have read the information above and that you have been informed of the research purpose. With your signature, you acknowledge that you have received a copy of the consent form and you are voluntarily participating in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Thank you for taking part in this dissertation research.

## **APPENDIX C. SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW INITIAL QUESTIONS**

1. Please tell me about your experience as you transitioned to becoming a researcher able to do independent research.
2. How have you changed during the transition to independent researcher?
3. What is it about you that enabled you to successfully conduct independent research?
4. Please tell me about a time that you experienced difficulties as a doctoral student. What did you do when that happened?

Possible prompts:

- Were there any people who impacted you when you were a doctoral student transitioning to becoming a researcher? (faculty, adviser, friends, family)
- How do you feel about being an independent researcher?
- How do you feel about your research accomplishment?
- Please tell me about your research?