


Chapter 5

Building Your Dissertation in Practice Blueprint: Guidance for Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

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ABSTRACT

Doctoral students often struggle to make sense of theoretical and conceptual frameworks, yet these foundations are essential for building rigorous and impactful research. This chapter offers a clear, practice-oriented guide to understanding, selecting, and applying frameworks in the Dissertation in Practice (DiP). Beginning with the role of worldview and positionality, it demonstrates how doctoral students stand “on the shoulders of giants” by engaging with established theories that ground and extend inquiry. The chapter then distinguishes theoretical frameworks, which provide the structural elevation of a study, from conceptual frameworks, which map its design and flow. Using the metaphor of constructing a research house, the chapter provides practical strategies, visual tools, and a running case study to illustrate each step of framework development. By demystifying complex terminology and offering accessible and practical guidance, it equips scholar-practitioners to craft coherent, credible, and meaningful studies that bridge academic traditions with real-world change.

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INTRODUCTION

Doctoral students in educational practice programs (EdD) often encounter abstract concepts that can seem disconnected from the realities of their work as practitioners. Among the most misunderstood, yet fundamentally important, components of the Dissertation in Practice (DiP) (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, 2022) are theoretical and conceptual frameworks. These frameworks are critical for grounding a study and providing a structured lens to examine and interpret complex problems within a specific context (Hiba, 2024). However, the often-confusing terminology surrounding these concepts can create significant barriers, leaving many students uncertain about how to meaningfully integrate a framework (or frameworks) into their scholarly work (Grant & Osanloo, 2014; Hiba, 2024; Hughes et al., 2019; Kivunja, 2018; Luft et al., 2022).

Many doctoral students (also referred to interchangeably herein as researchers) struggle to answer key questions, such as: What exactly is a framework? Are theoretical and conceptual frameworks the same? How do they shape the design and direction of my study? Most importantly, how do I select or construct a framework that meaningfully supports my investigation of a real-world problem in my professional context?

This chapter is designed to address those common questions and uncertainties directly. Drawing from our experiences as doctoral students, faculty mentors, dissertation chairs, and researchers, the authors of this chapter clarify the differences and connections between theoretical and conceptual frameworks, provide practical strategies for developing them, and illustrate how frameworks will guide the entire research process. Rather than talking about frameworks in abstract terms, we focus on your work as a scholar-practitioner. You will find clear explanations, visual tools, and a running case study featuring “Lukas,” a fictional school leader who navigates the framework-development process step by step. Our goal as the authors of this chapter is simple: to make frameworks less intimidating and more applicable. By the end of this chapter, you will be able to accomplish the following objectives:

Objective 1: Explain how your worldview and positionality impact your research choices.

Objective 2: Clearly distinguish between theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

Objective 3: Decide when and how to use each one in your dissertation.

Objective 4: Discuss how frameworks provide alignment across the problem, purpose, research questions, and methodology.

Objective 5: Apply practitioner-focused tools to design your own “research house.”

In short, this chapter is designed to help you transition from feeling stuck or confused about frameworks to feeling equipped and confident. The chapter offers a comprehensive exploration of theoretical and conceptual frameworks in research,

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