

Managing Tensions on the Journey to Become a Practitioner-Researcher: *A Dialectical Approach*

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Abstract

This paper examines the Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) as a dialectical process of professional and scholarly transformation. Drawing on Benson's (1977) dialectical theory, it explores how practitioner-researchers experience and integrate multiple tensions—identity (professional–academic), activity (working–studying), knowledge (practical–theoretical), growth (learning–doing), and argument (verbal–written)—throughout their doctoral journey. A qualitative systematic literature review of 33 peer-reviewed studies was conducted following Snyder's (2019, 2024) methodological framework. Using interpretive analysis, thematic coding, and AI assessment, the review identifies how these tensions function as generative forces that enable reflection, synthesis, and identity reconstruction. Rather than viewing tension as a barrier, the DBA is conceptualized as a process where professional experience and scholarly inquiry coalesce, producing ‘Mode 2’ knowledge that bridges theory and practice (Gibbons et al., 1994). The findings reveal that successful DBA candidates employ critical reflexivity to transform opposing demands into opportunities for integrated understanding and scholarly contribution (Farrell, Oerton, & Plant, 2018; Yourston & Bown, 2024). As a result, this paper contributes to the literature by framing the DBA as a living dialectical system in which tension fuels development, enabling professionals to become reflexive practitioner-researchers who unite action and reflection in the pursuit of meaningful organizational and academic impact.

Keywords: DBA; practitioner-researcher; dialectical theory; tension; professional doctoral education; Mode 2 knowledge; systematic literature review

Introduction

Professional doctoral education, particularly the DBA, embodies a dialectical landscape defined by persistent and productive tensions. These tensions—professional–academic (Yourston & Bown, 2024), working–studying (Davies, McGregor, & Horan, 2019), practical–theoretical (Farrell et al., 2018), learning–doing (Hay, 2022), and verbal–written (Gill & Mullarkey, 2015)—reflect the contradictory forces described by dialectical theorists such as Benson (1977) and Lewis (2000). The journey from professional to practitioner-researcher presents a profound developmental challenge: managing the multiple tensions that arise when professional expertise intersects with scholarly inquiry. The problem guiding this study is understanding how business professionals manage the tensions that define the journey to becoming practitioner-researchers. The area of concern focuses specifically on how accomplished business professionals balance the competing demands of professional practice and academic research while maintaining performance in both domains.

The study is framed through dialectical theory, which offers a conceptual lens for understanding how tensions function as drivers of change rather than obstacles to progress (Benson, 1977; Lewis, 2000). Dialectical theory posits that tensions are inherent conditions of development. Rather than seeking their resolution, dialectical logic embraces them, recognizing that progress emerges from engaging with, rather than eradicating, the opposing forces involved. Within the DBA context, these forces manifest as a series of interrelated tensions: identity tension (professional–academic), activity tension (working–studying), knowledge tension (practical–theoretical), growth tension (learning–doing), and argument tension (verbal–written). Together, they form a dialectical system in which tensions generate

reflection, transformation, and ultimately, professional and scholarly integration (Hay & Samra-Fredericks, 2019; Banerjee & Morley, 2013).

The purpose of this study is to explore how DBA students experience and manage these tensions as they transform from accomplished professionals into practitioner-researchers. The central research question is: *How can accomplished business professionals manage the core tensions involved in becoming practitioner-researchers?* By examining this question, the study seeks to deepen understanding of the learning processes, identity negotiations, and reflexive practices that underpin professional doctoral education (Poole, 2018; Lester, 2012). It contributes to a growing body of research surrounding the DBA program by applying dialectical theory to the available literature (Bourner, Ruggeri-Stevens, & Bareham, 2000; Gill & Hoppe, 2009).

To address this question, a qualitative systematic literature review was conducted following Snyder's (2019, 2024) model for rigorous and transparent review design. Searches were performed through the Georgia State University Library databases, using combinations of 'Doctorate of Business Administration,' 'DBA,' and 'professional doctorate' to capture interdisciplinary perspectives across management and education. After screening 975 initial results, 33 peer-reviewed studies were selected for full-text review and manually coded, then entered into NVivo using a theory-informed framework based on four primary tensions—activity, knowledge, growth, and argument—with identity tension emerging through AI analysis. Coding decisions were cross-checked through team collaboration and AI-assisted validation to ensure methodological consistency and interpretive depth.

The findings demonstrate that DBA students do not eliminate tensions but learn to harness them as mechanisms for development (Farrell et al., 2018; Hay, 2022; Kearney, Harrington, Dempsey, & Collings, 2024). This process leads to the creation of Mode 2 knowledge (Gibbons et al., 1994), which is contextually grounded, actionable, and capable of bridging theory and practice. By managing these tensions skillfully, professional practitioners transform from knowledge consumers to knowledge creators, integrating scholarly inquiry into their leadership practice (Foster, Kirk, Kougiannou, & Scurry, 2024; Lester, 2012). This study advances dialectical theory within professional doctoral education by illustrating how tension operates as a developmental principle, synthesizing how DBA students navigate the duality of professional and academic life, and ultimately reframing tension management as the central dynamic of practitioner-researcher formation.

Theoretical Framing

Dialectical Theory as Foundation

Dialectical theory provides the conceptual foundation for understanding how accomplished business professionals navigate the complex journey of becoming practitioner-researchers. Rooted in the philosophical traditions of Heraclitus, Hegel, and Marx, dialectical thinking recognizes that reality is fundamentally characterized by tensions and opposing forces that exist in dynamic relationship with one another (Benson, 1977; Lewis, 2000). Unlike conventional approaches that seek to resolve tensions or view them as problems to be eliminated, dialectical theory posits that tensions are inherent, productive, and necessary for growth, learning, and transformation. This perspective is particularly relevant to the DBA context, where the coexistence of professional and academic demands is not a design flaw but

the very engine of transformative learning (Hay & Samra-Fredericks, 2019; Banerjee & Morley, 2013).

Benson's (1977) dialectical perspective offers a robust framework for understanding organizational and educational phenomena through four interrelated principles. Tension acknowledges that opposing elements can coexist and mutually define one another rather than being mutually exclusive. Totality situates individual tensions within broader social, institutional, and historical contexts. Praxis emphasizes the cyclical interaction between action and reflection, theory and practice, creating new knowledge through dynamic interplay. Mediation refers to the processes—dialogue, reflection, inquiry—through which tensions are engaged and integrated rather than resolved. Applied to the DBA, these four principles illuminate why the tensions experienced by practitioner-researchers are not incidental but structurally necessary features of the doctoral journey (Bourner et al., 2000; Poole, 2018).

Lewis's (2000) work on paradox management extends Benson's framework by introducing the concept of 'dynamic equilibrium'—the ongoing, active balancing of opposing forces rather than their permanent resolution. This concept is central to understanding how practitioner-researchers manage the five core tensions identified in this study. Rather than choosing between professional and academic identities, between practical and theoretical knowledge, or between action and reflection, successful DBA candidates learn to hold these opposites in productive tension, drawing energy and insight from the interplay between them (Hay, 2022; Farrell et al., 2018; Yourston & Bown, 2024).

Professional Doctoral Education

Professional doctoral programs, particularly the DBA, represent unique educational contexts where tensions are not incidental challenges but fundamental design features. Unlike traditional PhD programs that primarily socialize students into academic roles, professional doctorates must simultaneously maintain students' professional identities while developing their research capabilities (Banerjee & Morley, 2013; Gill & Hoppe, 2009). This dual requirement creates an inherently dialectical educational experience that has been documented across a wide range of institutional and national contexts (Wallace et al., 2015; Kalika & Platt, 2022; Digout, Salloum, & Senechal, 2019).

The reflective practitioner concept developed by Schön (1983) exemplifies dialectical thinking in professional education. Schön's framework recognizes that effective professional practice requires engaging in both action and reflection, moving fluidly between doing and thinking. Professional doctoral education extends Schön's concept by adding the dimension of scholarly inquiry to professional practice, creating additional tensions as students must learn to engage in systematic research while maintaining their effectiveness as practitioners (Davies et al., 2019; Hay, 2022). The resulting practitioner-researcher identity represents a dialectical synthesis that transcends traditional boundaries between academic and professional roles (Yourston & Bown, 2024; Lester, 2012).

The concept of Mode 2 knowledge production (Gibbons et al., 1994) further illuminates the epistemological stakes of the practitioner-researcher journey. Mode 2 knowledge is transdisciplinary, problem-oriented, and produced in a context of application—precisely the kind of knowledge that DBA graduates are positioned to generate. Several corpus studies document how DBA programs serve as sites for Mode 2 knowledge creation, where the

productive tension between professional experience and scholarly inquiry yields insights that neither domain could produce alone (Foster et al., 2024; Lester, 2012; Garfield, Owen, & Higson, 2022). This epistemological framing reinforces the argument that the tensions experienced by DBA students are not obstacles to knowledge production but its very mechanism. Together, these dialectical and epistemological frameworks allow us to conceptualize the DBA not merely as a complex educational environment, but as a ‘living dialectical system.’ In Benson’s (1977) terms, a system is ‘living’ when its tensions are self-reproducing and recursive—when the resolution of one tension inevitably generates the conditions for the next. The DBA is a living system because the practitioner-researcher identity is never permanently fixed; it must be continuously renegotiated as the candidate moves between the workplace and the academy, ensuring that the dialectical engine of growth remains in motion (Lewis, 2000; Hay & Samra-Fredericks, 2016).

The Practitioner-Researcher Transition

Complementing the dialectical framework, identity theory provides a nuanced account of how professionals undergo the fundamental self-reconceptualization required by the DBA journey. Identity transitions of this magnitude involve not merely the acquisition of new skills but a deep restructuring of how individuals understand themselves, their competencies, and their relationships to professional and scholarly communities (Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006; Knight, 2015; Davies et al., 2019). The DBA candidate occupies what might be described as a ‘liminal space’—a threshold state between established professional identity and an emerging scholarly identity—in which the familiar markers of professional competence are temporarily destabilized (Hay, 2022; Yourston & Bown, 2024; Keefer, 2013). This liminality is not a

failure of the program but a necessary condition for the identity reconstruction that professional doctoral education demands (Farrell et al., 2018; Poole, 2018).

Several corpus studies document how this identity transition unfolds through participation in communities of practice (Hay & Samra-Fredericks, 2019; Mendonça et al., 2015; Lester, 2012). As DBA candidates engage with both professional and academic communities, they develop what might be termed ‘boundary-spanning’ identities—capacities to move fluidly between different epistemic communities, translating knowledge across contexts and contributing meaningfully to both (Foster et al., 2024; Garfield et al., 2022; Kearney et al., 2024; McCarthy et al., 2022). This boundary spanning is not merely a social skill but an epistemological achievement: it requires the integration of tacit professional knowledge with explicit scholarly frameworks in ways that produce new, contextually grounded insights (Gibbons et al., 1994; Lester, 2012; Banerjee & Morley, 2013). The DBA, in this sense, functions as a structured environment for identity experimentation, providing the scaffolding—through supervision, cohort support, and curriculum design—that enables professionals to safely explore and reconstruct their sense of self as practitioner-researchers (Hay & Samra-Fredericks, 2019; Yourston & Bown, 2024; Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006).

The corpus also reveals that identity reconstruction in the DBA is not a linear progression but a recursive, iterative process characterized by periods of advance and retreat (Farrell et al., 2018; Hay, 2022; Knight, 2015). Candidates frequently report oscillating between confidence and doubt, between feeling like competent professionals and feeling like novice researchers, a pattern consistent with the dialectical logic of thesis-antithesis-synthesis (Benson, 1977; Lewis, 2000). What distinguishes successful candidates is not the absence of this oscillation but the development of meta-cognitive awareness—the capacity to recognize and reflect on

the oscillation itself as a productive feature of the learning process (Hay, 2022; Yourston & Bown, 2024; Halse & Mowbray, 2011). This meta-cognitive dimension is central to the development of critical reflexivity, which Farrell et al. (2018) and Yourston and Bown (2024) identify as the defining competency of the practitioner-researcher (see also Liddle, 2025).

Tensions as Productive Forces

Dialectical theory suggests that the tensions experienced by practitioner-researchers are not temporary challenges to be overcome but ongoing features of professional development that require continuous navigation (Benson, 1977; Lewis, 2000). This perspective has several important implications for understanding the DBA journey. First, tensions function as productive forces: rather than viewing tensions as obstacles to learning, dialectical theory recognizes them as the source of growth and transformation, motivating individuals to develop new capabilities and perspectives that integrate opposing demands (Hay & Samra-Fredericks, 2019; Farrell et al., 2018). Second, integration is preferred over resolution: the goal of managing tensions is not to resolve them permanently but to develop the capacity to navigate them skillfully, requiring what Lewis (2000) terms ‘dynamic equilibrium.’ Third, the practitioner-researcher identity is emergent rather than predetermined, developing through experience with the tensions inherent in bridging professional and academic worlds (Yourston & Bown, 2024; Knight, 2015; Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006). Finally, while the five core tensions may be universal features of professional doctoral education, their specific manifestations depend on individual, organizational, and institutional contexts, a finding consistent across the corpus (Hammond, 2017; Strang & Symonds, 2012; Mendonça, Parker, Udo, & Groves, 2015).

Methodology

Research Design

This study uses a rigorous systematic literature review to explore how established business professionals navigate the transition from professionals to practitioner-researchers during their DBA program. A literature review is the best fit because it brings together what is already known, identifies gaps, and provides insight into complex, evolving experiences such as the DBA journey (Snyder, 2019). Because this topic centers on professional identity, reflection, and transformation, a qualitative, interpretive approach is best suited. Rather than measuring variables, the goal is to uncover patterns, meaning, and context about how professionals make sense of being a business leader as they become practitioner-researchers. Following Snyder's (2019) guidance, the review was intentionally structured to be systematic and transparent rather than a mere narrative summary. This study also follows an interpretivist paradigm, meaning knowledge is developed through understanding and interpretation of lived experiences (Snyder, 2024). Snyder (2024) also reminds us that a strong review does more than describe trends; it contributes new insight by connecting ideas in ways that move the conversation forward—an aim that continues to guide this work.

Search Strategy and Selection

The search process was designed to be thorough and repeatable. Using the Georgia State University Library database ensured access to both management and education research. The search used the following Boolean string: ('Doctorate of Business Administration' AND DBA AND 'professional doctorate'). Filters limited results to peer-reviewed, English-language, full-text journal articles. The initial search produced 975 results. After removing duplicates and inaccessible files, 735 articles remained. Titles and abstracts were reviewed for relevance, and then inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied. After the screening process, 55 articles were

kept for full-text review. Each was evaluated for its alignment with the central research question. Thirty studies met the criteria, and a reference list review identified three more through citation searches. In total, 33 articles form the current literature data set, consistent with Snyder's (2019) emphasis on transparency and quality in literature reviews.

Data Extraction, Coding, and Analysis

Once the team finalized the 33 research articles for inclusion, all sources were logged in a shared Excel tracker. The tracker managed assignments and decisions: citation details, color-coded group, primary and secondary coder, inclusion status, links and locations, and coder notes. The file functioned as a working matrix and audit trail for screening and coding activities, in line with Snyder's (2019, 2024) emphasis on a systematic, transparent review process. To organize coding responsibilities, the team divided the 33 articles into three color-coded groups of 11. Before beginning the first round of coding, the group developed a theory-informed starting codebook of tensions from scoping and framing work: activity tension (working–studying), knowledge tension (practical–theoretical), growth tension (learning–doing), and argument tension (verbal–written). After primary coding, each set of 11 articles was second-coded by another team member. At this stage, the study introduced a methodological innovation: the integration of AI-assisted coding alongside human analysis. Rather than using AI merely as a reliability check, the research team deployed it as an analytical partner to detect latent patterns across the corpus that human coders, focused on manifest tensions, might overlook. This human-AI collaborative coding process revealed that identity was not merely a background context but a pervasive, emergent code in its own right, leading to the formal identification of the identity tension as a fifth core node. Finally, one team member coded all articles in NVivo using this expanded framework. The finalized coding

structure yielded five core tensions—identity, activity, knowledge, growth, and argument—reflecting Snyder’s (2024) call to move beyond descriptive summaries toward concept-centric synthesis.

Results

The systematic analysis of 33 academic papers revealed five important tensions in practitioner-researcher development: Identity Tension, Activity Tension, Knowledge Tension, Growth Tension, and Argument Tension. The identity tension, defined as the ongoing dialectical struggle between established professional identities and emerging academic researcher identities, appeared in 100% of the papers and typically served as a meta-tension that gives meaning to the other four (Yourston & Bown, 2024; Davies et al., 2019; Bournier et al., 2000). The following section presents the results related to each tension, including its interaction with the identity tension.

Identity Tension

The identity tension emerged as the most prevalent and foundational tension in practitioner-researcher development, appearing explicitly in all 33 papers analyzed. The analysis revealed two primary opposing forces and the corresponding response involving their continuous integration.

Table 1: Identity Tension in Practitioner-Researcher Development

Tension	Description	Frequency	Representative Evidence
Opposition 1: Professional Identity Preservation	Maintaining credibility and effectiveness in organizational contexts while developing academic capabilities	28/33 (85%)	"DBA candidates must navigate the challenge of remaining relevant and effective in their professional roles while simultaneously developing the scholarly mindset required for rigorous

			research" (Bourner et al., 2000)
Opposition 2: Academic Identity Development	Developing legitimacy as researchers and ability to contribute to scholarly knowledge	31/33 (94%)	"The transition from expert practitioner to novice researcher creates significant identity discomfort as established competence markers are challenged" (Davies et al., 2019)
Response: Identity Integration	Continuously synthesizing professional and academic identities into coherent practitioner-researcher identity	33/33 (100%)	"The practitioner-researcher identity represents a dialectical synthesis that preserves valuable elements from both domains while transcending limitations of either alone" (Yourston & Bown, 2024)

Twenty-eight papers (85%) explicitly addressed concerns about professional identity preservation, with evidence indicating that professionals worry about losing credibility with colleagues, becoming disconnected from practical realities, and compromising their organizational effectiveness (Bourner et al., 2000; Grabowski & Miller, 2015; Hammond, 2017). Thirty-one papers (94%) documented the challenges professionals face in developing academic researcher identities, a process involving fundamental shifts in how individuals understand knowledge, research, and their relationship to scholarly communities (Davies et al., 2019; Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006; Knight, 2015). All 33 papers (100%) addressed the continuous challenge of integrating professional and academic identities into a coherent practitioner-researcher identity. The analysis revealed that successful integration represents a dialectical synthesis rather than a compromise between competing identities (Yourston & Bown, 2024; Farrell et al., 2018; Hay & Samra-Fredericks, 2019). Twenty-nine papers (88%) identified reflective practice as fundamental to this identity development, enabling practitioner-researchers to examine their evolving sense of self and integrate new academic

capabilities without abandoning professional expertise (Farrell et al., 2018; Hay, 2022; Mendonça et al., 2015).

Activity Tension

The activity tension, defined as the ongoing dialectical struggle between professional work responsibilities and academic study demands, emerged as a significant challenge in 30 of the 33 papers analyzed (91%). This tension captures the practical challenges of balancing competing demands on time, energy, and focus (Davies et al., 2019; Strang & Symonds, 2012; Hammond, 2017).

Table 2: Activity Tension in Practitioner-Researcher Development

Tension	Description	Frequency	Representative Evidence
Opposition 1: Professional Demands	The need for immediate action, responsiveness, and decision-making in professional roles	27/33 (82%)	"DBA candidates work 'within a professional context,' simultaneously managing 'the researcher and the current environment and the interconnectivity between the two'" (Davies et al., 2019)
Opposition 2: Academic Demands	The need for reflection, systematic inquiry, and extended focus in academic work	29/33 (88%)	"Academic work requires a different temporality, one that allows for deep reflection and systematic analysis, which often conflicts with the fast-paced demands of professional life" (Bourner et al., 2000)
Response: Work-Study Integration	The continuous effort to integrate professional and academic activities into a coherent workflow	25/33 (76%)	"Successful candidates develop strategies to create synergies between their work and study, transforming competing demands into opportunities for integrated learning" (Yourston & Bown, 2024)

The analysis indicates that the activity tension is not merely a time-management challenge but a fundamental conflict between two modes of being and acting. The professional role demands immediate, decisive action and responsiveness to urgent issues (Davies et al., 2019; Lange, Smith, Spradley, & Johnston, 2018; Grabowski & Miller, 2015). In contrast, the academic role requires a slower, more contemplative mode of engagement characterized by deep reflection and systematic inquiry (Bourner et al., 2000; Hay, 2022). Twenty-eight papers (85%) emphasized the importance of negotiation and support systems—proactively managing the expectations of employers, colleagues, and family members—as a critical mechanism for navigating this tension (Strang & Symonds, 2012; Hammond, 2017; Kearney et al., 2024). Twenty-two papers (67%) documented the importance of creating synergy between work and study by selecting research topics directly relevant to professional roles, thereby transforming workplace challenges into research problems (Englisch, 2018; Lester, 2012; Foster et al., 2024). The activity tension is deeply intertwined with the identity tension: the allocation of time and energy between professional and academic activities is not just a practical matter but a performance of identity (Farrell et al., 2018; Yourston & Bown, 2024). Successful navigation involves a shift in identity where individuals begin to see themselves as integrated practitioner-researchers who can move fluidly between different modes of activity.

Knowledge Tension

The knowledge tension, defined as the dialectical struggle between practical, experiential knowledge and formal, theoretical knowledge, was identified as a core challenge in 32 of the 33 papers analyzed (97%). This tension captures the epistemological challenge of integrating different ways of knowing (Gibbons et al., 1994; Lester, 2012; Foster et al., 2024).

Table 3: Knowledge Tension in Practitioner-Researcher Development

Tension	Description	Frequency	Representative Evidence
Opposition 1: Practical Knowledge	Tacit, contextual, and action-oriented knowledge gained through professional experience	30/33 (91%)	"Practitioners possess a wealth of tacit knowledge that is often difficult to articulate but essential for effective professional practice" (Schön, 1983)
Opposition 2: Theoretical Knowledge	Explicit, generalizable, and analytically oriented knowledge emphasized in academic settings	31/33 (94%)	"Academic research provides theoretical frameworks that can illuminate practical problems, but they often seem disconnected from the messy realities of organizational life" (Gibbons et al., 1994)
Response: Knowledge Integration	The synthesis of practical and theoretical knowledge to create new, actionable insights	32/33 (97%)	"The DBA 'needs to embrace the importance of co-production,' uniting academic rigor with professional relevance" (Yourston & Bown, 2024)

The analysis shows that the knowledge tension is not about choosing between practical and theoretical knowledge but about integrating them to create a more robust understanding of complex problems (Gibbons et al., 1994; Lester, 2012; Banerjee & Morley, 2013). Thirty papers (91%) emphasized the value of practical knowledge, while 31 papers (94%) highlighted the importance of theoretical knowledge. The overwhelming consensus across 32 papers (97%) is that the goal is to integrate these two forms of knowledge (Yourston & Bown, 2024; Foster et al., 2024; Garfield et al., 2022). Twenty-six papers (79%) identified problem-based learning—using real-world problems as the starting point for inquiry and drawing on theory to illuminate practice—as the primary mechanism for navigating this tension (Hay & Samra-Fredericks, 2019; Mendonça et al., 2015; Digout et al., 2019). The knowledge tension is closely linked to the identity tension: individuals who strongly identify as practitioners may resist

theoretical knowledge, viewing it as impractical or irrelevant, while those who over-identify with the academic role may devalue practical knowledge (Farrell et al., 2018; Yourston & Bown, 2024). As Farrell et al. (2018) argue, critical reflexivity allows candidates to ‘interrogate the dynamic tensions associated with real-life practice and scholarly research,’ a process central to identity transformation.

Growth Tension

The growth tension, defined as the dialectical struggle between reflective learning and active practice, was identified as a key developmental challenge in 28 of the 33 papers analyzed (85%). This tension captures the challenge of balancing the need for deep, reflective learning with the demands of immediate, practical action (Hay, 2022; Farrell et al., 2018; Mendonça et al., 2015).

Table 4: Growth Tension in Practitioner-Researcher Development

Tension	Description	Frequency	Representative Evidence
Opposition 1: Reflective Learning	The process of deep, critical reflection on experience to generate new insights	26/33 (79%)	"DBA programs encourage a process of 'recognizing and engaging with unknowingness: through understanding the limits of what, how, and when they know'" (Hay, 2022)
Opposition 2: Active Practice	The need for immediate action, decision-making, and problem-solving in professional roles	27/33 (82%)	"Professional practice demands decisive action, often leaving little time for the deep reflection required for transformative learning" (Argyris & Schön, 1976)
Response: Reflective Practice	The integration of reflection and action into a continuous cycle of learning and development	28/33 (85%)	"This iterative movement enables 'a clearer understanding of the complex journeys undertaken' by professional learners" (Farrell et al., 2018)

The analysis indicates that the growth tension is not about choosing between learning and doing but about integrating them into a continuous cycle of reflective practice (Schön, 1983; Hay, 2022; Farrell et al., 2018). Twenty-six papers (79%) emphasized the value of deep, critical reflection, with Hay (2022) documenting how DBA programs encourage candidates to engage with ‘unknowingness’—recognizing and working productively with the limits of their knowledge. Twenty-five papers (76%) identified peer dialogue and coaching as a key mechanism for navigating the growth tension, enabling candidates to gain new perspectives on experience and challenge assumptions (Hay & Samra-Fredericks, 2019; Mendonça et al., 2015; Kearney et al., 2024). The growth tension is fundamentally linked to the identity tension: individuals who strongly identify as practitioners may prioritize action over reflection, limiting their capacity for deep learning, while those who over-identify with the academic role may become trapped in reflection, struggling to translate insights into practical action (Farrell et al., 2018; Hay, 2022). Successful navigation involves an identity shift in which individuals come to see themselves as reflective practitioners who can move fluidly between action and reflection, using professional practice as a site for learning and learning as a guide for practice (Yourston & Bown, 2024; Lester, 2012).

Argument Tension

The argument tension, defined as the dialectical struggle between the verbal, informal communication styles of professional practice and the formal, written discourse of academic research, was identified as a significant challenge in 29 of the 33 papers analyzed (88%). This tension captures the challenge of learning to communicate in a new, scholarly voice (Gill & Mullarkey, 2015; Davies et al., 2019; Poole, 2018).

Table 5: Argument Tension in Practitioner-Researcher Development

Tension	Description	Frequency	Representative Evidence
Opposition 1: Professional Discourse	Verbal, informal, and action-oriented communication styles used in professional contexts	27/33 (82%)	"Executives are accustomed to a style of communication that is immediate, persuasive, and focused on practical outcomes" (Gill & Mullarkey, 2015)
Opposition 2: Academic Discourse	Formal, written, and evidence-based communication styles required for scholarly research	29/33 (88%)	"Candidates must 'develop publishing capabilities' to disseminate findings within both professional and academic communities" (Davies et al., 2019)
Response: Discourse Integration	The ability to communicate effectively in both professional and academic contexts, adapting style to audience	26/33 (79%)	"The DBA is 'a bridge that increases partnering between academic research and practice,' requiring executives to rearticulate experiential knowledge through the 'rigorous scientific method'" (Gill & Mullarkey, 2015)

The analysis shows that the argument tension is not about replacing professional communication skills with academic ones but about developing the capacity to communicate effectively in both contexts (Gill & Mullarkey, 2015; Poole, 2018; MacLennan, Pina, Moran, & Hafford, 2016). Twenty-seven papers (82%) highlighted the role of peer review and feedback in developing a more effective and scholarly writing style, with candidates reporting that the iterative process of writing and revision was central to their development of a scholarly voice (Davies et al., 2019; Digout et al., 2019; Halse & Mowbray, 2011). The argument tension is deeply intertwined with the identity tension: the struggle to find an authentic scholarly voice is central to the identity development process (Yourston & Bown, 2024; Knight, 2015; Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006). Successful navigation involves an identity shift in which

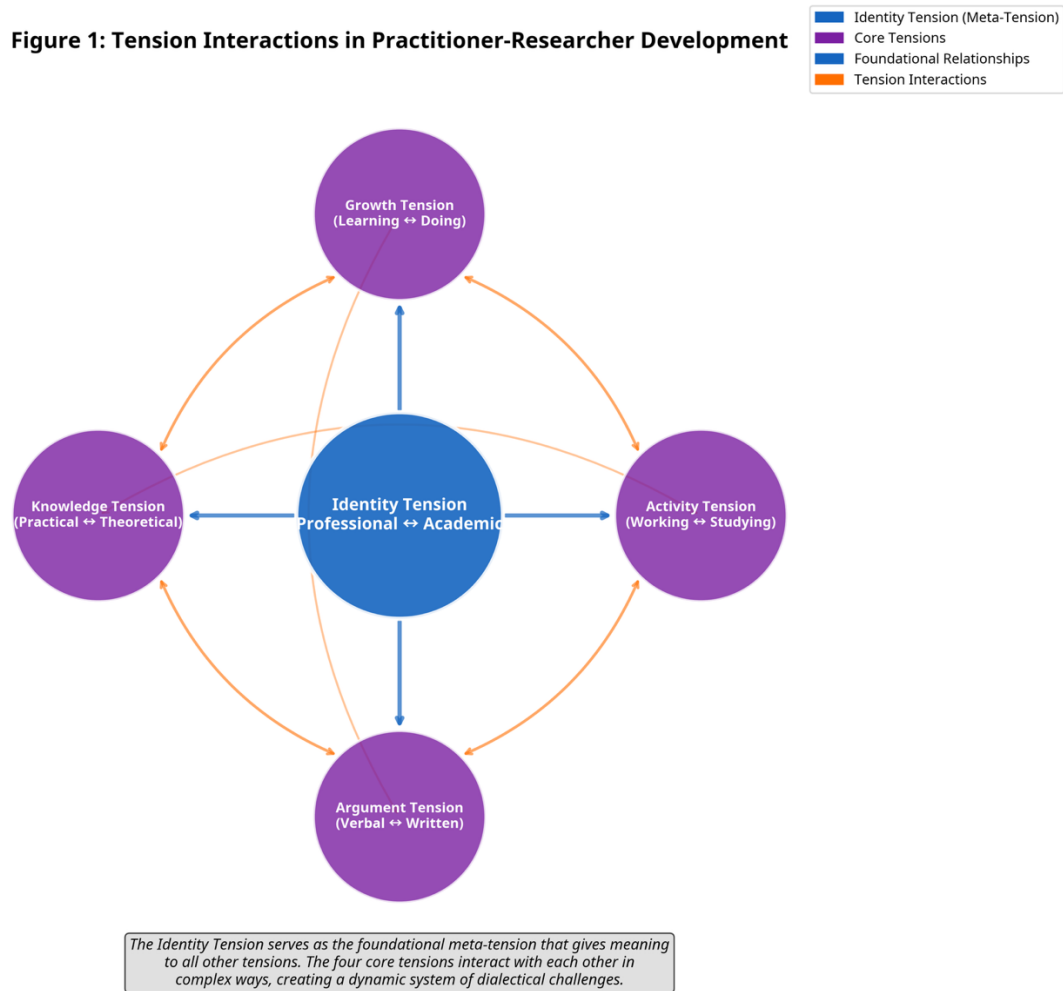
individuals come to see themselves as capable of speaking with a dual voice—one that is both academically rigorous and professionally relevant—enabling them to bridge the communication gap between academia and practice, a core competency of the practitioner-researcher (Gill & Mullarkey, 2015; Farrell et al., 2018).

Tension Interactions: A Systemic View

The analysis revealed that the five core tensions do not exist in isolation but interact in complex and dynamic ways, forming an interconnected system of challenges and opportunities (Benson, 1977; Lewis, 2000). The identity tension serves as the foundational meta-tension that gives meaning and coherence to the other four, but significant interactions also exist among the remaining tensions, creating ripple effects across the entire system (Yourston & Bown, 2024; Farrell et al., 2018).

The central finding of this systemic analysis is that every operational tension ultimately collapses back into the identity tension. When a candidate struggles to find time for study (Activity Tension), they are not merely facing a scheduling conflict; they are confronting the reality that their established professional identity demands priority over their fragile researcher identity (Bourner et al., 2000). When they struggle to integrate theory with practice (Knowledge Tension), they are wrestling with which epistemic community they truly belong to (Lester, 2012). When they resist adopting a scholarly voice (Argument Tension), they are resisting the shedding of the authoritative executive persona that has historically guaranteed their success (Hay, 2022). In this way, the identity tension is the gravitational center of the living dialectical system: it is the fundamental struggle from which all other tensions emerge and to which they all return.

Figure 1: Tension Interactions in Practitioner-Researcher Development



Beyond this meta-relationship, the operational tensions also interact directly with one another. For example, the activity tension (work-study balance) is often exacerbated by the knowledge tension (practical-theoretical integration). The need to engage with theoretical literature can feel disconnected from the immediate demands of professional practice, making it difficult to justify the time and effort required for academic work. As Bourner et al. (2000) note, ‘the pressure to produce immediate results at work makes it difficult to engage in the deep, reflective learning required for doctoral study.’ This interaction highlights how epistemological challenges can amplify practical ones. Similarly, the growth tension (learning-doing balance) is closely linked to the argument tension (verbal-written communication): the

process of learning to write in a scholarly voice is a key part of the reflective learning process, and as candidates struggle to articulate their ideas in writing, they are forced to clarify their thinking and deepen their understanding (Gill & Mullarkey, 2015; Hay, 2022; Digout et al., 2019).

The tensions can also be mutually reinforcing in positive ways. A successful experience integrating practical and theoretical knowledge (knowledge tension) can boost a candidate's confidence in their academic abilities, helping to alleviate the identity tension (Lester, 2012; Foster et al., 2024). A candidate who successfully applies a theoretical model to solve a real-world problem not only validates the model but also validates their emerging identity as a practitioner-researcher (Yourston & Bown, 2024; Kearney et al., 2024). Similarly, a positive experience of presenting research findings to a professional audience (argument tension) can help to bridge the gap between work and study (activity tension), as the professional community begins to see the value of the candidate's academic pursuits (Gill & Mullarkey, 2015; Garfield et al., 2022; Halse & Mowbray, 2011). These findings suggest that the five core tensions are not discrete challenges but interconnected aspects of a single, complex process of practitioner-researcher development, and that interventions aimed at addressing one tension are likely to have ripple effects across the entire system.

Discussion

Positioned at the intersection of professional practice and academic inquiry, this paper addresses the central research question: How can accomplished business professionals manage the core tensions involved in becoming practitioner-researchers? A systematic analysis of 33 academic papers on professional doctoral education was conducted using a dialectical theory

framework to identify and analyze the core tensions that shape the practitioner-researcher journey. The analysis revealed five central tensions—identity, activity, knowledge, growth, and argument—which collectively define the developmental challenges and opportunities inherent in professional doctoral education (Benson, 1977; Lewis, 2000; Yourston & Bown, 2024).

Theoretical, Methodological, and Practical Contributions

This study contributes to the literature by reframing the DBA journey as a dialectical process of transformation in which tensions serve as generative forces for growth rather than as obstacles to be overcome (Benson, 1977; Lewis, 2000). Drawing on this theoretical foundation, the paper conceptualizes the DBA as a ‘living dialectical system’ in which tension fuels the development and integration of professional practice and scholarly inquiry. Empirically, the paper makes a significant contribution by identifying and synthesizing five interrelated tensions that characterize the practitioner-researcher journey. These tensions, evident across nearly all 33 studies analyzed, are shown to be pervasive, interdependent, and productive features of DBA education rather than discrete challenges to overcome (Farrell et al., 2018; Hay, 2022; Yourston & Bown, 2024; Foster et al., 2024; Kearney et al., 2024).

Methodologically, the study advances the literature by developing a theory-informed coding framework that integrates Snyder’s (2019, 2024) model of systematic literature review with dialectical analysis. By pioneering the use of human-AI collaborative coding to detect latent constructs—which directly led to the identification of the identity meta-tension—the research offers a transparent, replicable, and technologically augmented process for mapping tensions qualitatively. This produces a five-category coding scheme that can guide future research on professional identity transformation. Theoretically, the study extends understanding of how

identity develops in professional doctoral education by positioning the identity tension as a meta-driver that underpins and interacts with all other tensions—a finding consistent with, and extending, prior work on DBA identity formation (Davies et al., 2019; Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006; Knight, 2015; Yourston & Bown, 2024).

The paper also makes a practical contribution by demonstrating how tensions can function as developmental levers in professional education. It suggests that reflective practice, community engagement, and boundary-spanning activities enable practitioner-researchers to harness rather than suppress tensions, transforming them into opportunities for integration and learning (Hay & Samra-Fredericks, 2019; Mendonça et al., 2015; Englisch, 2018). For educators and program designers, this reframing implies that tensions should be intentionally surfaced and supported within the curriculum as catalysts for transformation, a recommendation supported by evidence from multiple corpus studies (Banerjee & Morley, 2013; Kalika & Platt, 2022; Wallace et al., 2015). The study's findings are directly aligned with the EMS 2026 conference theme of 'Bright Ideas, Lasting Impact,' demonstrating how practitioner-researchers who successfully navigate these tensions are uniquely positioned to generate Mode 2 knowledge (Gibbons et al., 1994) that produces lasting organizational and societal impact (Garfield et al., 2022; Halse & Mowbray, 2011; Foster et al., 2024).

Implications for DBA Program Design

The prevalence and interconnectedness of these five tensions across all 33 papers analyzed have significant implications for the design and delivery of professional doctoral programs. The findings suggest that programs must adopt a holistic, integrated approach that explicitly acknowledges and supports the dialectical challenges of practitioner-researcher development

(Banerjee & Morley, 2013; Kalika & Platt, 2022; Digout et al., 2019). At the curriculum level, programs should integrate identity development exercises and reflective essays throughout (Farrell et al., 2018; Yourston & Bown, 2024), use problem-based learning and case studies that require the integration of theory and practice (Hay & Samra-Fredericks, 2019; Mendonça et al., 2015), incorporate reflective practice workshops and journaling (Hay, 2022), and offer dedicated courses on scholarly writing and presentation skills (Gill & Mullarkey, 2015; Digout et al., 2019).

At the supervision level, supervisors should be trained to act as identity coaches who support candidates through the emotional and psychological challenges of identity transformation (Yourston & Bown, 2024; Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006), while guiding work-study integration strategies and encouraging co-production of knowledge with practitioners (Hay & Samra-Fredericks, 2019; Foster et al., 2024; Lester, 2012). At the program structure level, offering part-time, online, and other flexible learning options accommodates the needs of working professionals (Strang & Symonds, 2012; Hammond, 2017; Grabowski & Miller, 2015), while creating partnerships with industry facilitates knowledge exchange and creates opportunities for engaged scholarship (Garfield et al., 2022; Kearney et al., 2024; Wallace et al., 2015). At the assessment level, portfolio-based identity documentation, reflective essays, and work-based projects allow for the practical application of theoretical knowledge and the assessment of communication skills in both academic and professional contexts (Farrell et al., 2018; Poole, 2018; MacLennan et al., 2016). This requires a fundamental shift in how we think about doctoral education—from a process of knowledge transmission to a process of identity transformation (Banerjee & Morley, 2013; Yourston & Bown, 2024).

Limitations

This study acknowledges several important limitations that should inform the interpretation of its findings and guide future research. First, as a systematic literature review, the study is necessarily limited by the scope and quality of the existing published literature on the DBA (Snyder, 2019). The 33 articles in the corpus represent a significant but not exhaustive sample of the available research, and the inclusion criteria—focusing on peer-reviewed, English-language journal articles—may have excluded relevant practitioner accounts, conference papers, and non-English language studies that could enrich the findings (Snyder, 2024; Digout et al., 2019). Second, the corpus is predominantly drawn from Western, English-speaking institutional contexts, particularly the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia, which may limit the transferability of findings to other cultural, linguistic, and national settings where the DBA is offered (Wallace et al., 2015; Kalika & Platt, 2022; Digout et al., 2019). Third, as a secondary data analysis, the study cannot fully capture the lived experience, emotional complexity, and contextual nuance of individual DBA students' journeys (Farrell et al., 2018; Hay, 2022; Davies et al., 2019). The voices of DBA candidates are mediated through the interpretive frameworks of the original study authors, introducing an additional layer of interpretive distance. Finally, the emergent identification of the identity tension through AI-assisted coding, while methodologically innovative, represents a novel approach whose validity and reliability should be further tested through primary empirical research (Snyder, 2024).

Concluding Remarks

This study concludes that the development of practitioner-researchers in DBA programs is best understood as a dialectical process of transformation, in which tensions act as generative forces that drive integration between professional practice and academic inquiry (Benson, 1977;

Lewis, 2000). Through a systematic analysis of 33 peer-reviewed studies, five interrelated tensions were identified—identity, activity, knowledge, growth, and argument—that collectively define the challenges and opportunities of becoming a practitioner-researcher (Yourston & Bown, 2024; Davies et al., 2019; Farrell et al., 2018; Hay, 2022; Gill & Mullarkey, 2015). These tensions are not isolated obstacles but dynamic, interconnected forces that stimulate reflection, learning, and synthesis. By conceptualizing the DBA as a living dialectical system, this study advances theoretical understanding of how tension fuels both professional and scholarly development.

The paper's main contributions lie in three areas. Empirically, it provides a foundation for designing DBA curricula that intentionally surface and support tensions through reflective practice, community engagement, and boundary-spanning activities (Hay & Samra-Fredericks, 2019; Mendonça et al., 2015; Englisch, 2018; Foster et al., 2024). Methodologically, it demonstrates an innovative, theory-informed coding framework that integrates human and AI-assisted analysis to map tensions systematically across multiple studies (Snyder, 2019, 2024). Theoretically, it extends dialectical and identity development theory by positioning tension as the mechanism of transformation within professional doctoral education, building on and extending the foundational work of Benson (1977), Lewis (2000), Schön (1983), and Gibbons et al. (1994).

However, this study is limited by its reliance on secondary data and interpretive synthesis, which may not capture the full complexity or lived experience of individual DBA students (Snyder, 2019). The corpus is also predominantly drawn from English-language, Western institutional contexts, which may limit the transferability of findings to other cultural and national settings (Wallace et al., 2015; Kalika & Platt, 2022). Future research should include

longitudinal, empirical studies that follow candidates throughout their doctoral journey (Strang & Symonds, 2012; Halse & Mowbray, 2011), explore institutional and cultural variations in tension management (Digout et al., 2019; Kearney et al., 2024), and examine how emerging technologies reshape the practitioner-researcher experience. Overall, this research contributes to a richer, more integrated understanding of how tensions function as catalysts for transformation in professional doctoral education—a contribution directly aligned with the EMS 2026 conference theme of ‘Bright Ideas, Lasting Impact,’ offering both rigorous scholarly insight and actionable guidance for those who design, lead, and participate in professional doctoral programs worldwide (Garfield et al., 2022; Kearney et al., 2024; Foster et al., 2024).

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