

Life Long Learning is an Incredible Gift!

Theresa F. Lock

I have been working for over four decades in the field of early childhood education (ECE). I am currently entering my fifth year as an early childhood teacher educator with the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UHM) College of Education. In my role, I am teaching future professionals in a dual degree program with a preschool through third grade (PK–3) and elementary (K–6) focus and providing professional support to school principals and teachers in our state's public prekindergarten program.

Three years ago, I was excited to be accepted into the second cohort of the UHM College of Education's doctor of education (EdD) in professional educational practice program. On Saturday, July 22, 2017, I was among twenty-five doctoral candidates who graduated from the EdD program. Feelings of joy and gratitude swept over me when I heard my name being called and as I walked across the Kennedy Theater stage to be hooded by my dissertation committee members. As I accepted my diploma from university leaders, it was a surreal moment to be recognized as a doctor! This is a dream that I have had for many years, and it finally became a reality.

As I reflect back over the past three years, some of my personal highlights of this doctoral journey were the people, the content and process, and my dissertation.

The People

I knew a cohort experience was the right pathway for me and from day one, I was not disappointed. During our first meeting, I instantly found that I was with a unique and diverse group of caring, positive, intelligent, and gifted educational leaders. Cohort members represented different sectors: public, public charter, private, early childhood, K–12, higher education and came from Maui, Hawai'i Island, and O'ahu. We came with similar and different life experiences and a strong common desire to improve our education system. Through our doctoral journey we became a tight-knit community as we shared and supported the ups and downs of our personal and professional lives. Our cohort was surrounded by the expert knowledge and

skills of our experienced directors, program manager, staff, faculty, advisors, and mentors. They generously provided the content, structure, and guidance for us to learn and develop as a community of doctoral candidates. They challenged us, listened to us, and more often than not, they allowed us to co-construct our learning with them.

The Content and Process

I appreciated the rigorous content and the learning strategies of this program that was carefully crafted and taught by our faculty. This consisted of readings, discussions, and assignments on topics such as, research methodologies, inquiry approaches and theories, curriculum and program evaluation, and applied statistics. While exploring identity, diversity, and leadership in the social and cultural contexts of educational settings, we examined complex problems in education that focused on questions of equity, ethics, and social justice. We read and discussed areas of effective educational leadership and administration such as types of school leadership, policy making in education, technology leadership, and professional development. A critical part of our curriculum was information and guidance from mentors and advisors in the development and completion of our group consultancy projects to resolve complex problems of educational practice in our surrounding communities.

My Dissertation

One of the most meaningful yet difficult learning experiences was the planning and writing of my dissertation in practice. For example, in the planning stage, I found it both exciting and challenging to refine and be more precise about my problem of practice related to my work. I struggled to link my theories as a practitioner with a systematic inquiry process. This included starting an early review of the literature, and returning to conduct additional review of more literature as I collected data through my multiple case study and during my data analysis process. I found that I had to be extremely disciplined about my time as I worked on my dissertation. In the writing, re-writing,

editing, and formatting of my dissertation, it worked best if I did it in a systematic manner. However, sometimes my process was not a straight forward path. I had to remind myself that I was working against the clock. It was extremely helpful to have the experience and assistance of my dissertation advisor and committee members who kept steering me forward. When I finally submitted my completed dissertation to the UHM graduate office, it was a huge relief and accomplishment.

Presenting our Work

From July 18 through July 20, 2017, our EdD program conference was held at UHM's physical education athletic complex lecture hall. The purpose of the conference was to provide each member of our cohort an opportunity to present our finished or near finished individual dissertations to the public, to one another, and to those who guided us along this individualized portion of our journey. The presentations were organized by themes: 1) Ho'okahua: 'O ke kahua ma mua, ma hope e kūkulu, Establishing a foundation for teaching and learning; 2) The historical present of language and culture in Hawai'i; 3) Community, leadership, and transformation; 4) Approaches to curriculum development; 5) Leadership and communities of practice; 6) Approaches to improving student achievement; 7) Developing successful leaders; and 8) Culturally-based teaching and learning.

As I listened and watched each person share an overview of the features of his or her dissertation and explain what insights were learned through each research study, I was deeply moved by the intellectual rigor, confidence, and sincere gratitude displayed by each cohort member. As each one spoke so eloquently and passionately, a sense of pride welled up inside of me that reflected the transformative learning journey we had been on together. I found myself reflecting on my own personal and professional growth and felt thankful for the gift of this doctoral program.

A few days ago, I re-read an article written by Dr. Carl A. Grant (2012) as part of our discussions about social justice issues in education. In his article entitled "Cultivating Flourishing Lives: A Robust Social Justice Vision of Education," Grant argued that the current purpose of the U.S. education system, which has been focused on the preparation of our students for employment and consumerism, is too narrow a vision. Rather, Grant proposed that

education should be about the cultivation of flourishing lives for all students. Regardless of race, ethnic background, socioeconomic status, language, religion or gender, each student's individual interests, talents, and aptitudes should be nurtured. Grant stated that we first need to be clear about the meaning of *cultivating* and *flourishing*, where every child is given time and attention to become a thriving individual, a citizen "living with and practicing wisdom, beauty, and the common good" (Castoriadis 1991, 123). Grant emphasized that we need to acknowledge that what constitutes a flourishing life for our students is shaped by the history and culture of the group to which an individual belongs. Furthermore, Grant explained that the idea of personal flourishing is an ethical commitment at the heart of multicultural democratic education.

As the UHM College of Education's EdD program strives to become an effective educational leadership development program that takes experienced practitioners and grows them into scholarly-practitioners, I believe this doctoral program and all those who graduate through this program can implement a robust social justice vision of education in our state. My wish for my grandchildren and all keiki of Hawai'i is that they will have an education that will be responsive to who they are and with a robust social justice of education, vision they will have flourishing lives.

REFERENCES

- Castoriadis, Cornelius. 1991. *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy: Essays in Political Philosophy*. New York, NY: Oxford Press.
- Grant, Carl A. 2012. "Cultivating Flourishing Lives: A Robust Social Justice Vision of Education." *American Educational Research Journal*, 49(5): 910-934. doi: 103102/0002831212447977
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