

# The EdD Cohort Experience: Students' Reflection on the Program

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## Introduction

Presented as a collection of short essays, the authors of this chapter reflect on their experience in the UH Mānoa EdD program and the questions, “What have you been able to take away from the experience?” and “What are you doing now that the EdD made possible?” The authors entered the program with a wealth of experience in education at all levels in public and independent institutions. They characterize the program as empowering, validating, transformative, and part of a journey of continuous professional development. Connections with other educational professionals, leaders, and change-makers is a hallmark of the EdD program; in these cases, those connections continue to be powerful elements of the authors' lives. During and after the program (2011–2014), most experienced changes in their jobs—some in locus of employment, some in place of residence. All have experienced positive growth, which they attribute to the EdD program; these impacts continue to resonate in their lives and the lives of others.

## Writing as a Reflective Practitioner *Jocelyn Romero Demirbag*

By the time I was in the second and third grade, I was an avid reader, and my dream was to become a writer; I wanted to be a novelist as that was the only kind of writing I knew then. But after a couple of scarring experiences with sharing my childish writing, I put that dream aside as I grew up. The fact that I now spend much of my weekends writing is a pleasant surprise. I received this gift as a result of the EdD process.

In April 2014, I learned about a call for book chapters to be published in Stead's volume “The Education doctorate (EdD): Issues of access, diversity, social Justice, and community Leadership.” The proposal touted “. . . a belief in the power of the EdD to prepare highly competent

scholars for civic engagement” (personal communication, April 2014). The call inspired me to write about the power of values-based research, practitioner-based research, and the importance of giving voice to a community, all of which I had addressed in my newly completed EdD dissertation (Demirbag 2014, 2015a). Several articles later, I wrote “Gifts of the doctoral process” and concluded:

I am continually amazed that my path ‘accidentally’ brought me to an action research-based dissertation; I never expected to continue moving ahead as a researcher within my professional practice and outside the university setting. Validation, confidence, empowerment, informed action, as well as the generation and sharing of my living-educational theory—these are the gifts of the doctoral process. (Demirbag 2015b, 74)

Through the process of completing the EdD, I engaged in “reflective practice,” which continues to serve me and my school today. I find myself participating in a constant dialogue between myself, my practice, and my co-workers' responses; we are a perpetual triangle of discussion and growth that evolves all of us and ultimately leads to student impact. And, “As often happens when you engage earnestly with a question, articles, books, and conversations followed” (Schaefer manuscripts, 2017, 1). The EdD retrained my thinking so that after 43 years of squelching my writing aspirations, I can now say that I am a writer.

The EdD also taught me that I can also say I am a practitioner. Through the EdD, I found that I resonated with Schön's descriptions of “reflection-in-action” and “reflective conversations” (1983). The confidence I gained through accepting myself as a practitioner allowed me to dare to write and speak aloud my “living-educational-theories” (McNiff and Whitehead 2010). I took to heart their words:

You can create your own personal theory about any aspect of your work, regardless of where that work is located. This theory is a part of you. Because you are a living person, you are changing every day; and because you are reflecting consciously on what you are doing, and making adjustments as you go, your theory is also developing with you. Your theory is part of your thinking and living, which is continually transforming. So your theory, as part of your own thinking, is living. (252)

I began to consciously explore, test, and apply the theories I had developed over the years prior to the EdD but had never thought of as living theories. In particular, I began to explore one paragraph from my dissertation that persistently called to me:

An important and esoteric side note here is that some believe that behind this mission stands an angel, a spirit (“school spirit”), a being, or even what Hawaiians call an *‘aumakua*. Pali Jae Lee (2007) defined *‘aumakua* as “guardian, spirit of the family, source” (113). She further explained that the *‘aumakua* “is the essence...the sum total of all who have gone before, from the last to the first. It is the beginning of all things . . . every halau (school) had its own *‘aumakua* to watch over it” (113). Waldorf schools hold the belief that there was a being or spirit at its core. (Demirbag 2014, 134)

I developed an explorative workshop with two other friends to examine the being at the core of Waldorf schools and its relationship to the concept of *‘aumakua*. We used sitting meditation, walking meditation, art, hula, interviews, and chanting to see if we could approach this being. This exploration became “Spirit of My Place on Earth: Connecting with the Being of a Hawaiian Waldorf School” (Demirbag 2016).

Writing that article inspired me to introduce the idea of connecting teaching and learning to place at the opening meetings of the next school year. We learned how to make a variety of lei, we held a service project at a rare natural spring in the area, and we discussed how our curriculum might reflect the significance of our location. This led to the faculty’s further interest in discussing our location and its relevance to curriculum and we decided to bring in Neil Boland from New Zealand who could address this topic at our statewide Waldorf conference. Neil challenged us to audit our curriculum specifically for place, time, and

community, and we soon accepted that challenge. We agreed that Neil would come to Hawai‘i again for our next year’s opening meetings to run the audit. To prepare for it, we answered a series of questions developed by Neil and me two months after the conference as well as four months after the conference. And upon concluding the audit, Neil and I decided to write a number of articles describing the process our school had gone through.

Through the reflective practice I developed as an EdD student, I stumbled onto the research niche of spiritual geography. More importantly, my dialogue with self extended to include my practice and my colleagues, setting our school on a path of re-evaluating our curriculum. This will improve our teaching and bring relevance to our students’ learning experience.

To contribute to improving, a social situation therefore means first engaging with one’s own learning, and then bringing that learning into a social situation. This means talking with people, and showing your awareness of your own learning and how you might influence them. (McNiff and Whitehead 2010, 251)

I am excited about the possibility that my dream of writing can lead to improvement for others, a dream that materialized through the EdD journey.

## The EdD Cohort Experience

### *Steve Nakasato*

I entered the EdD cohort program as an experienced and hard-working educator. After twenty-seven years as a teacher and school administrator (sixteen as a principal), I did not imagine that another degree would change my professional pathway, however there were pieces of the program that were particularly appealing even for an “old dog” like myself. In addition to earning a degree in three years, in Hawai‘i, I was genuinely excited about making a difference by researching among a prominent collection of local practitioners. Albeit retirement was in my distant forecast, being awarded a doctorate gowned in academic regalia and hooded with a “puffy hat” was unimagatively alluring.

At the beginning of the cohort journey, I remember asking myself if I truly fit into the requisites of the program. Even after being indoctrinated about PhD

and EdD programs, I had to grasp that the University of Hawai'i EdD was evolving, inimitable, and resolutely pragmatic. I was definitely anxious about ostensible voids of predetermined learning outcomes and compliance, but I deeply believed in the program's philosophical commitment to people and systems learning through hands-on experiences. I also agreed that there were no simple answers for complex problems, but an array of adaptive approaches, and therefore it was evident that the Hawai'i EdD and I not only "fit," but we entirely amalgamated.

Throughout the three-year cohort journey, I thoroughly enjoyed every opportunity to dialogue and learn among my colleagues while laughing at each other's circumstantial campus craziness. However the most important schooling that I attained throughout the cohort journey was becoming cognizant of context and its ubiquitous effect on everything. Throughout my career, I have been surrounded by context, but I did not appreciate and learn from it. As a principal, I was trained to forge vision, construct professional development, and organize systems, but not to lead a school from the heart of the organization where context continuously circulated.

When asked, *what have I been able to take away from the EdD cohort experience*, I have summarized my thoughts into new learnings. My first new learning was that I became a problem finder. Prior to the cohort, I relied on antiquated practices of problem solving in solitude, but the cohort retooled me with skills to incorporate stakeholder contexts that have opened collaborative discussions of understanding prior to rushing into hasty solutions that never addressed the origin of the problem.

Another new learning that I developed was becoming an equitable principal. I was formerly adept about implementing equality, but doing so caused unintended exclusionary decisions instituted by aligning disparate needs with equally divided resources. By valuing equity, I have become mindful of the array of contexts and broaden my work to serve panoramic student populations who have not received fair supports or simply been overlooked because of other acquiescence urgencies.

The third new learning that I have gained was becoming trustful of educators beyond the Hawai'i Department of Education (HIDOE). Despite being landlocked in public education for three decades, I found the program's connection to leaders from higher education, private and

independent schools, and cultural-based and public charter schools to be inconceivably valuable. In addition to exposing me to innovative ideas beyond my paradigms, my cohort colleagues taught me to open my world of thinkers and to collaborate on the most challenging school complexities founded on circumstance and compassion.

Now that a few years have passed since commencement services, I have been questioned, *what am I doing now that the EdD made possible?* Interestingly, my "new" learnings have resolved into staunch leadership outcomes. The first leadership outcome was that the EdD transformed me from a problem finding principal to a leader with an affirmed sense of purpose. Beyond helping me intently understand problems, the EdD has transformed my learnings into actions entrenched in a vision not misdirected by static and irrelevant scores. In place of codified values, the EdD has mapped my professional purpose, rooting it in improvement sciences, nurturing relationships, cultivating collective knowledge, fostering site-based leadership, and promoting efficacious accountability.

The next leadership outcome that the EdD is currently advancing is updating me from an equitable principal of resources, to becoming a research-based principal who is attentive to co-developing resources through partnerships. The EdD has led me to study researcher and practitioner partnerships that co-designing innovative provisions of equity. Being cognizant of previous unfulfilled relationships between researchers and practitioners, I am learning how to kindle partnerships where practitioners comprehend research because they help to develop it and researchers study context because they value it.

The third leadership outcome that the EdD made possible has been to open my professional community, from the University of Hawai'i EdD program to state and national educational policy leaders. Soon after the EdD commencement services, I transferred from a directorship in the Office of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment, to a principalship at Pearl Ridge Elementary. A couple of years later, I shifted again to become a Principal in Residence at the Professional Development Educational Research Institute, revealing that I have changed jobs almost yearly since graduating. As a testament to the EdD, my continuous redirection of my professional journey has been preset by my original intent of applying the UH Cohort where I wanted to make a difference by researching among a prominent

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collection of practitioners. As a result of my “new learnings and leadership outcomes,” accentuated with a Doctorate of Education, I have been fortuitously invited to support organizations such as the Educational Institute of Hawai‘i and Governor Ige’s ESSA Blueprint Team. And as of recent, I was additionally privileged to work with past HIDOE superintendent Paul LeMahieu and national leaders to collaborate on Research Practice Partnerships—a trail that will undoubtedly lead me to another professional pathway.

In conclusion, the EdD has been much more than an unimaginatively alluring degree because it has entirely transformed my capacity to understand context and to work within complexity while granting me trusted relationships that I will cherish forever. Most meaningful, I believe that the University of Hawai‘i EdD program has irrefutably freed a cohort of exemplary practitioners who are actively engaging in research and collectively improving institutional practices and processes that will surely innovate significant educational advancements for all children.

### **Inquiry, Connection, and Change: A Reflection on the Transformative EdD Experience**

*Alyson Kaneshiro*

Life is full of questions—questions that drive our inquiry, reflection, and decisions. What would your dream job be in five years? How am I an educational leader? How will I connect educational theory to practice? What are my “gots” and “growth edges”? Where should I go to grow and who can I trust to guide me there? These are the questions I grappled with immediately before, during, and after my time in the EdD program. In this article, I will reflect on how the intentional design of the EdD program cultivated my ability to answer these important questions; answers that created huge shifts in my thinking and enabled me to pursue career opportunities that have elevated my professional growth far beyond what I expected.

During a faculty inclusion activity in 2011, I was paired with our school’s curriculum coordinator and she asked, “What would your dream job be in five years?” At the time, I was working as a student services coordinator overseeing the special education compliance process at our elementary school. “I would like to be a professor of literacy in a college of education,” I responded without hesitation. “You know, there’s a new doctoral program at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. I have a flyer for it. I’ll send it to you.”

Needless to say, I went to the informational meeting advertised on the flyer and by the following summer I was accepted as a candidate in the EdD program. I was one of thirty candidates accepted to the program in the summer of 2011. Our first semester in the fall was packed with coursework in educational technology, statistics, and educational leadership. All of us maintained full-time jobs while taking these classes and we all worked hard to keep pace with our assignments despite daily workplace and personal demands.

Fortunately, the EdD attracted professors and educational leaders who were skilled in creating a trustworthy space, where we could connect around our shared struggles and speak candidly about confronting our institutional challenges and problems of practice we wanted to solve. In the EdD space, I felt like my voice was heard and valued. This grew my confidence over time. Initially, I had a very difficult time seeing myself as an educational leader. The assignment that gave me the most trouble was writing my educational leadership philosophy. I ended up turning in a vague smattering of leadership buzzwords and weak examples that did not sound like me or reflect a cohesive educational leadership philosophy at all. This was the first piece of many pieces of writing that would be gently rejected by my professor because of my inability to speak my voice in my writing; my professor who later became my dissertation advisor and mentor that was instrumental in helping me discover my voice and embrace leadership by our journey’s end.

By the time I was ready to develop my research proposal, I was midway through the program. The easy part was selecting an action research methodology. This methodology matched my desire to find out how teachers developed classroom interventions and viewed our school’s implementation process of intervention systems. The difficult part was creating a research plan that was structured clearly enough to uphold the tenets of the Institutional Review Board, yet open ended enough to allow teachers to be creative and willing to share their voices authentically during the research process. Ultimately, I wanted my dissertation to illustrate how collaborative action research with teachers could connect theory (what researchers suggest teachers do) to practice (what teachers can realistically accomplish in their classroom contexts) in authentic and meaningful ways. My university professors and classmates

with implementation experience took on the role of mentors by helping me navigate the research design and implementation process from start to finish. Through this experience, I developed strong working relationships with many members of the EdD cohort who later played pivotal roles in supporting my career changes after graduation.

Post graduation in 2014, I began feverishly applying to new positions in my organization. I was confident that I was fully prepared to move beyond the school level to district or state level positions. I applied to two special education positions at the district level and one at the state level. The state level position was responsible for facilitating the implementation of intervention systems statewide; exactly what I had been studying and conducting action research on for an entire year. I was thrilled and excited for the opportunity to scale up my work in the system I had devoted my entire career to improving.

In preparation for the interview process, I concentrated on identifying my “gots” and “growth edges” post EdD. Alison Park of Blink Consulting introduced me to these terms during a Leaders of Color Conference in San Francisco. She described “gots” as an education toolkit that includes knowledge, understandings, skills, habits, and strategies. Jennifer Garvey Berger (2004) describes growth edges in terms of people’s thinking and sensemaking, and suggests that it is the threshold of transformation or the edge of understanding. By completing the EdD program, I added leadership experience, research skills, systems implementation, and collaborative decision-making to my “gots” toolkit. The EdD pushed the boundaries of my growth edges by connecting me with mentors who accompanied me to my edges and supported me to find my way to new understandings.

So, after completing three interviews and many long conversations with my mentors, I was disheartened when I was issued the third and final rejection letter. Once I realized the career opportunities in the Hawai‘i Department of Education were inaccessible, I made the decision to turn my attention away from Hawai‘i to universities and educational systems on the continental west coast. After submitting over thirty applications to educational institutions in Washington State, California, and Oregon, I found my place in California. Late summer 2015, the University of San Francisco (USF) decided to hire me as an adjunct professor in their special education department to teach a course on data-based decision-making in reading. Coincidentally around

the same time, my classmate from the EdD program, Dr. Mike Walker, began a new chapter in his career as a Head of School at San Francisco Day School, an independent K–8 institution, where he connected me to a maternity leave position as a sixth-grade learning specialist. I am currently working at both institutions and feel certain that the new pathway into independent schools was the right choice to fulfill my desire for continued inquiry, growth, and change.

Although I am in a completely different place than I expected to be, I still remain connected to the people from the EdD program who continue to advance and support my growth as a professional educator. For me, the most significant takeaway from the EdD program is the connection I made to other educators who have been willing to accompany me to my growth edges, helping me find the courage I needed to transform challenges into opportunity. After this journey of inquiry, connection, and change, the only question I have now to ponder is, “So what’s next?”

### **The Map to Radical Transformation: Reflecting on the EdD as a Team**

*Kyle Atabay, Erika K. Cravalho, and Elsa Pua Ka’ai*

The Education Doctorate in Professional Educational Practice gave us the map to lead change in our institution that in many respects was more radical than just innovative. It is through the EdD program that we were able to move buildings, thoughts, and individuals toward a culture that begs constant dialogue and questions around how to best serve our indigenous students.

Our research grew out of a collaborative idea that specific questions needed to be answered when designing and building innovative learning environments and programs for indigenous Hawaiian learners. Teacher collaboration was inherent to that design process and thought, and would prevail long after the physical building was completed. Clearly, the research would be the avenue through which we would both test the work we were doing and also support and confirm theories surrounding a new program and physical space. We reflect here on three research studies that inform how the culture of our school has developed a program and a direction that provides a frame for our work going forward.

The first study is an investigation into teacher collaboration—an exploration into the extent to which collaboration exists in the school. The intent to focus on

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collaboration was to inform the architectural design of the new facility and to enlighten the instructional design and delivery in the new teaching and learning space. The action research process enriched the administrators' journey of leading the building and design process, and influenced the culture of a school. What began six years ago has grown to become the focal point of programmatic direction, teacher and team collaboration, and physical changes to the teaching and learning spaces. Further, the investigation into the impact of collaboration on innovative learning environments has influenced campus-wide discussions around the interrelationships between "brick and mortar" and program growth and development. In retrospect it is clear that a building would have been built to replace the old one whether or not the desire to do the research were present. More importantly, though, the culture of the school in terms of teacher collaboration may not have flourished, or even been considered important, had we not set about to intently research through doctoral studies the extent of collaboration amongst our teachers. To date, on-going theoretical and programmatic movement toward improving team collaboration in a wall-less environment enhances instructional delivery and the quality of program.

Teams are an integral part of any organization, and a team's ability to learn and adapt to their environment and others is key to an organization's success. In the second study, we examined synergy within a teacher leader group to gain their perspective and discover the experiences that foster synergy within the group. Synergy is referred to as multiple characteristics of a group, that when combined, create a greater effect than the sum of their individual effects in this study. This group of teacher leaders created an environment based on interdependence, shared responsibility, and mutual accountability to building the collective capacity of the entire staff. Three characteristics of synergy— environment, people, and passion—emerged in this study. We are convinced that when working with a team, synergy is necessary in order for the team to surpass what they could do on their own. It is a necessity for organizations to create an environment where teams work in synergy to foster improvement and innovation. A fundamental challenge in a school environment is to improve professional practice and the focus on capacity promotes the idea that there is no one way of learning. When people work in a synergistic state as a team, it evokes a feeling that connects

them to individuals' passions and personal interests. As an organization, we continue to shift from teams put together to cooperate in order to meet organizational goals to dynamic teams created through coordinated and collaborative structures that are constantly shifting to meet the needs of an ever-changing school environment. This has required our teachers to be innovators and problem solvers, motivating them to engage in affecting the growth and improvement of student learning. Having the characteristics of high levels of trust and respect, shared commitment to a clear and common purpose, willingness and ability to manage conflict, focus on measurable results, and mutual responsibility and accountability for outcomes have been the heart of our success and continued growth to support students and their voice in the learning process.

The third study sought to capture student voice via inquiry into our students' experience in an open-space learning environment on the dimensions of learning and social interaction. More importantly, it was found that this type of learning environment corresponds with and supports adolescent needs. As we reflect upon the journey since the research, student voice continues to remain at the core of programmatic directions, decision making, and curricular change. As this is an ongoing process, our work today focuses on establishing best practice for the use of our learning environment. We are fortunate that the flexibility of our learning spaces allows us countless opportunities to explore and innovate.

Our research is a statement of appreciation for the chance in our career for a group of educators to design and build a learning facility that echoes the needs of indigenous middle school students in a future century learning environment. The direction of this research and that which teachers and staff collaborated upon has forever changed how we do work in our school. Groups from our state public and independent education systems have come to dialogue about innovative learning environments and, in a few cases, we have helped to influence the design of others' buildings and programs. We have been recognized nationally and internationally through research conferences as well as through word of mouth visits by colleagues with shared passions for indigenous education in innovative environments. This recognition of our work demonstrates our commitment to constant improvement of program and pedagogy and it exemplifies the interest in our work by other indigenous

people from around the world. The Education Doctorate in Professional Educational Practice gave us the map to lead change that in many respects was more radical than just innovative.

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