

Chapter 88

Becoming Practitioner–Scholars: The Role of Practice–Based Inquiry Dissertations in the Development of Educational Leaders

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how educational leaders learn to engage in site-based inquiry within a leadership-focused doctoral program through coursework and dissertation research. There is a dearth of research on educational leaders engaging in research, and specifically in local inquiries, that speaks to how leaders enact practitioner research in their institutional settings and how this kind of engagement in inquiry influences their leadership practices. This chapter is the outgrowth of considerable program and dissertation structure development over 14 years and argues that there is considerable value, for mid-career leaders and for the field, in doing rigorous research as part of their doctoral studies. The chapter describes how dissertations are conceptualized, cultivated, and framed within the Mid-Career Doctoral Program in Educational and Organizational Leadership at the University of Pennsylvania; it explores the relationships among coursework, dissertation research, inquiry-based leadership practices, and the cultivation of scholar-practitioners in leadership.

INTRODUCTION

What it means to educate educational leaders, particularly within the context of university-based doctoral programs for mid-career professionals, has engendered considerable discussion in the scholarly literature over the past decade (e.g., Anderson, 2002; Elmore, 2006; Levine, 2005; Murphy, 2006a, 2006b; Shulman, et al., 2006). There has long been a powerful debate in the field of higher education about the value of educational doctorates for educational leaders. While much of this discourse centers

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on the relevance of coursework for educational leaders and the need for programs to be more practical and streamlined, critics on both sides share the view that doctoral programs for educational leaders must be restructured if they are to have a significant impact on the practices of leaders, on schools, and on the field of education more broadly (Levine, 2005; Murphy, 2006b; Shulman, et al., 2006). [Program name redacted] has responded to issues of the practical relevance of the educational doctorate in part by centering the Program on practitioner research. It has done so as a way to help educational leaders develop into practitioner-scholars with the knowledge and skills necessary to construct local inquiries, centralize research within their daily work and institutional functioning, and act as leaders of organizational learning and informed change, both locally and nationally.

While some critics (e.g., Levine, 2005; Murphy, 2006a) have proposed that – following the model of professional degrees in law and medicine – the dissertation should be eliminated in Ed.D. programs, several higher education scholars (e.g., Anderson & Herr, 1999; Schön, 1995) argue that the dissertation must be reconceptualized. They argue that the dissertation must be reconfigured so that it offers rich and rigorous opportunities for mid-career leaders to engage in research in which they can investigate and address significant problems that emerge from their everyday practices with the expressed goal of contributing to educational improvement, both within and beyond their own settings. This chapter has emerged within and from these ongoing debates about what constitutes valuable learning for educational leaders as well as within the tensions that exist around the kinds of research in which these leaders are asked to engage. The chapter is guided by a specific and timely interest in exploring how educational leaders learn about and then engage in professional, site-based inquiry through their engagement in a leadership-focused doctoral program, in site-based inquiries as a part of coursework, and ultimately in the culminating piece of scholarship, the dissertation. There is a dearth of literature on educational leaders engaging in research, and specifically in local inquiries, that speaks to how leadership-level practitioners enact practitioner research in their institutional settings and how this particular kind of engagement in inquiry influences their leadership practices (Anderson, 2002). This chapter is the outgrowth of considerable program and dissertation structure development over more than a dozen years and works from the assumption that there is considerable value, for mid-career leaders, in doing a sustained and substantial piece of research as part of their doctoral studies, and, further, that this kind of work is important to the field as a whole. The chapter describes how dissertations are conceptualized, cultivated, and framed within the Mid-Career Doctoral Program and through this discussion, explores the relationships among coursework, dissertation research, inquiry-based leadership practices, and the cultivation of scholar-practitioners in leadership.

The Mid-Career Doctoral Program offers a significant departure from most doctoral programs in educational leadership in that it addresses the ongoing transformation of educational organizations from a leadership perspective, focusing on four core areas of educational leadership which represent the four strands of the Program: Instructional Leadership, Organizational Leadership, Public Leadership, and Evidenced-based Leadership. A programmatic focus on practitioner research is conceptualized within, across, and beyond these four strands as an approach to helping educational leaders understand the value and implications of adopting an inquiry stance on/in their practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; 2009). Further, it is viewed as a framework in which leaders can learn how to enact leadership in ways that are driven by data they generate from questions and concerns emerging directly from their daily practices and settings. The research that these leaders in the Program learn to conduct is distinct from that of other executive doctoral programs and research paradigms in that:

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