THINKING EVALUATIVELY ABOUT A DOCTORAL PROGRAM FOCUSSED ON PRACTICE

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1. Introduction

In his 2011 article, Wergin (p. 121) writes: *"What we need is a new EdD, one that recasts decades-old wisdom in a twenty-first-century context."* He further suggests such a 'rebooting' of the EdD should be based on multiple principles including: *"Education at all levels has an important emancipating, rather than indoctrinating, function and thus is a powerful tool for social change"* (p. 121). Given the context of the pandemic and the *Black Lives Matter* movement, I think it is a good time to ask questions on the value-added of practice-based programs. *How do we actually value a practice-based program? How can such programs better incorporate a social-justice lens?*

In this paper, I ask questions related to valuing practice-based education from an evaluation perspective. For purposes of this paper, I will define evaluation as a systematic process of judging the value added as well as the process of improving systems and programs. Evaluative thinking is a reflective process that makes explicit the assumptions, values and mechanisms of how things will work. I argue that a progressive evaluation will need to help enhance this journey towards emancipation (and other longer-term goals) by involving students who have made this journey.

There are multiple purposes of evaluation including summative (judging the merit and worth of programs), formative (improving programs and organizations) and developmental (developing the interventions themselves). This paper takes a developmental evaluation perspective (Patton, 2011).

My view is that our theories of change of how practice-based programs makes a difference to outcomes like emancipation and social justice are quite incomplete. We need to learn from students who have

completed EdD programs to learn about how such programs can be further developed to be responsive to their circumstances/journeys. Such feedback will need to better understand the constraints and challenges in such journeys.

In preparing this manuscript, I did a review of the literature on evaluating practice-based programs. For the most part, the uses of evaluation in assessing practice-based programs is in my judgement quite narrow. There is little that I have seen in the literature that explores how thinking evaluatively about programs clarifies the EdD journey towards long-term goals.

My claim rather simply is that thinking evaluatively will help improve EdD programs—especially in an era where we are grappling with the salience and relevance of academic programs. Now (perhaps more than ever before), asking question on how academic programs adds value to society is important. During the pandemic, I have been especially interested in knowledge that can help practitioners be more sensitive to social justice. *A call to the emancipatory function of Education should not be rhetorical – it needs to hold the leaders in Education to account to learn from these experiences. The goal is not accountability but an accountability to learning*. This paper is written to dialogue with my students to learn about their journeys after the completion of the program.

Practical Goals

The practical immediate purpose of this paper is less lofty. This paper is being written both as a response of recent dialogues around structural racism in society but also my interests in evaluating a practice-based program I have been involved in – the EdD program at the University of Hawaii. Three

cohorts of students have completed their EdD. The program attempted to shape "*educational leaders who work collaboratively, apply research and theory, reflect critically and ethically, and utilize broad, interdisciplinary perspectives to recognize, create, advocate, implement, evaluate, and enhance spaces of social justice across Hawai'i and beyond*" (College of Education, 2020). This paper is guided by my experiences teaching the evaluation course for multiple cohorts of EdD students. It is as much looking and reflecting about my past experiences as looking forward. I ask questions around criteria to evaluate practice-based programs.

Positionality

While I taught in this EdD program, I was not affiliated fulltime with the University of Hawaii. I was in Toronto directing the Evaluation Centre for Complex Health Interventions. When the Director of the EdD program first introduced me to the ideas underlying the EdD program, I was enthused because I was interested in how best does one design doctorate programs focused on practice. Having worked for many years in academic settings, I was keen to see how a program focused on practice-based knowledge would evolve. I taught in a program focused on health. I was keen to learn how lessons focused on Education would transfer to health. My own relationship to the program was very much as an outsider who would show up in the summers to teach courses. I taught two courses for Cohort 1, and one course each for Cohorts 2 and 3.

As an evaluator, I brought an evaluative lens to the program. My view was that students were especially enthused about the problems of "*valuing*" and "*value-added*." For example, how best does one value a dance class taught in a high school? What is the value-added of a collaborative ethos in a doctoral program? These were examples of questions that I found students and faculty engaging in and struggling

with. Note the fluid, hard-to-define nature of terms like collaborative ethos made it also harder to evaluate. My role was to bring an evaluation of complex interventions lens to addressing such questions. Much of the focus was on evaluation concepts such as theories of change and contexts – this course was delivered in the setting of a program that whole heartedly embraced Dewey's call for a progressive education as "a product of discontent with traditional education." Concepts such as theories of change appealed because it provided a tool to help make the journey through challenging contexts. The practical questions I ask are: by what criteria should we be evaluating practice-based programs?

The Nature of the Experiment

It's worthwhile stressing that at all times Hunter (the founding Director of the EdD program) viewed this as an experiment. It was an experiment that was informed by a few key philosophical tenets but also deeply informed by the political realities of the university. Part of the initial conversations with Hunter were also questions around how best evaluations could help in assessing the success of this experiment.

The way Hunter viewed the role of the evaluation was to help create a learning evaluative environment in which evaluation itself served a developmental function. It is important to think dynamically about the success criteria of such an experiment. This paper itself seeks to raise questions around such success criteria while incorporating and recognizing that success of such an experiment should incorporate very heterogeneous views of what constitutes value added of such programs. Further, the students' own definitions of what constitutes success might change over time. It is important aspect of such an experiment to obtain feedback from its primary stakeholders how their own perceptions of success changed over time.

It was also important to recognize that in Hunter's view the knowledge guiding this experiment itself was incomplete. There was no pretense that all of the ideas at the outset were the ones that needed to be tested. Instead, there was an openness to trying new innovations as the program evolved.

Organization of the Paper

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses the types of knowledge that an evaluation of an EdD program can generate. One implication of framing goal for this paper is a reflection on the kinds of issues we should be raising in evaluating EdD programs its relevance to practice Section 3 discusses some of the questions that an evaluation of the UH EdD program needs to address. Section 4 discusses the implications of taking an evaluative lens to long term goals of social justice and emancipation.

2. Types of Knowledge that Evaluations of EdD Program can Generate

The opportunity to engage in a doctoral program squarely focused on a scholarship of practice and with a strong ethos of social justice included was exciting to me. Having seen first-hand multiple graduate programs that tended to reify abstract knowledge over implementation knowledge or *learning by doing*, I was especially enthused to see how a doctoral program focused on practice could generate knowledge that is different from more traditional programs.

It is also helpful to reflect on the types of knowledge that a Doctoral program focused on practice could actually generate and in what specific ways would this be useful. The UH EdD program is explicitly focused on practice-based knowledge. I view the potential excitement that an evaluation of program like this could generate are deeper insights around the context and support structures required for educational innovations to thrive. The whole essence of evaluation is a recognition that aspirations are often divergent from reality: I do feel that much academic discourse of 'best practices,' the context of

practice is often forgotten. *Given some of the elitism that academia can sometimes suffer from, and in some circumstances a slight condescension towards practice-based knowledge, being serious about valuing practice-based knowledge is incredibly important.*

Heterogeneous landscapes of change

Change is rarely linear or straightforward. There is a need to pay attention to the heterogeneous landscapes in which systems and organizations are located. Change rarely happens as a result of a single action. The actions were embedded in heterogeneous landscapes with multiple intersecting contexts. The simple fact that this discussion is taking place in a place such as Hawaii with such rich indigenous history makes the discussions around historical context even more relevant.

The importance of context

How do we teach the importance of context? In education research, it has surprised me that in a discussion of 'what works,' context shapes the boundaries of solutions; evaluation often is in the business of what works; what does it take to make something work. The evaluation provides an opportunity to dialogue (and learn from students' experiences) on the relevance of contexts, including historical contexts.

Learning from contextual understanding of educational leaders: Moving towards a decolonized solutions

What role did leadership play in solving problems? What insights about contexts could educational leaders provide? In developing new solutions, what role does understanding of contextual history play? Paying attention to historical context is especially important because we do want to make sure the evidence is grounded in contexts and historical contexts. The need to pay attention to historical contexts

is especially relevant given the historical realities of colonization and indigenous communities. Colonists solutions are often ignorant and disinterested in contexts or histories of place or settings. It is important that we move away from a remote view of 'what works' in specific settings and pay attention to local contexts.

Learning about bottlenecks

It is also important to explore if this program helped students to understand the bottlenecks in the system; and also helped develop knowledge to unlock the bottlenecks. Some obvious questions: What specific skills helped solved such bottlenecks? What were/are common bottlenecks at school, district, state levels? How did students become better solvers in addressing those bottlenecks? How did this program help build knowledge of solving bottlenecks?

Fungibility of knowledge

There is little reason to believe that the questions we are raising are only true for EdD programs. Some of these questions are equally relevant to practice-based Doctoral programs in other sectors such as health. How much of this knowledge is relevant for starting a doctoral program on practice in other fields such as public health? What are lessons from the experiences of this program that is fungible to other settings?

3. Evaluating a Doctoral Program in Practice

Clarifying what success means: A stakeholder-driven view

A critical starting point in thinking evaluatively about such a program is to ask: *What would success look like?* Given that it's a program of practice, should the success of this program be measured if the practice itself becomes enhanced as a result of the program? Or should the program be judged by the

quality of the dissertations? I've seen a number of "high-quality" dissertations from other programs that have little interest in enhancing practice.

Given the orientation towards practice, it is especially important that the criteria for success are not defined purely by traditional academic norms. Moving from one education paradigm to another necessitates that one does not use old criteria of success to judge the success of a new innovation.

One solutioning around the criteria of success problem is to have students who have successfully completed the program define what success means to them and in what ways the program has helped them achieve their criteria for success.

Value-added to Practice

In almost all cases, students joining the program had already embarked upon multiple years (in some cases multiple decades) of practice. An important set of evaluation questions needs to focus on: How did their practice become enhanced as a result of this graduate program? Did the collaborative structure of the program help them in any tangible way with problem-solving in their *specific contexts?* Was the program lacking in specific curriculum in providing skills to solve problems in the students' contexts?

Spread/Impacts

Another set of important evaluation questions focus on spread and impacts: How do such innovations that start in specific parts of the university percolate and impact educational systems more broadly? For

example, does the learning that comes from students working collaboratively help transform educational systems more broadly?

An additional set of important questions focus on the need for partners to sustain and enhance initial gains: What role could the private sector play in ensuring that the gains from such a program can be sustained? Are there other models of entrepreneurship that can help sustain such a program?

Value-added of a Collaborative Ethos

One of the unique features of this program was its strong focus on having students pursue a collaborative ethos. It was important to explore the value-added of such an ethos in multiple ways. At least four questions emerged from such a focus:

a) Did such an ethos help student finish their dissertations?
b) Did such an ethos help student in their work settings after the dissertation was complete?
c) Was the collaborative ethos failing in its implementation in some instances?
d) What more could be done by the program to maximize the gains associated with such a collaborative ethos?

A Focus on Indigenous Knowledge

This program also focused deeply on indigenous knowledge. It was important to probe, given that the setting was Hawaii, whether and in what ways did a focus on indigenous knowledge help students in their work settings. Equally important is to better understand through feedback how can a future version of such a program be better designed to better reflect and integrate indigenous perspectives.

Lessons learned on Capacities Needed

It is also important the students reflect on their journeys after getting their degrees. Cohort 1 has had six years after graduation and Cohort 2 has had 3 years. There also are important lessons that evaluation can highlight on the capacities needed for a doctoral program to deliver on the promise of practice. For example, should an EdD program's commitment to students end after the students obtain their EdD? Or should there also be a focus on providing assistance to students after the EdD as they return back to fulltime practice? What kinds of capacities are needed to ensure that the students can implement the knowledge they have learned in their practice?

One critical challenge was recognizing that the lessons learned from such a program might not transfer to quick success in students' abilities to solve problems right away. It might take some time. An evaluation can highlight knowledge on the types of support systems needed for students to achieve success over time.

Learning from the UH EdD Experience

One intriguing feature of this program was its focus on educational leaders in Hawaii. A bold hypothesis that drove the program was having education leaders come spend a few years working collaboratively with a diverse group of other education leaders would enhance their problem-solving capacities over time. My interest was in understanding how doctoral level programs can be structured to better train leaders with a history of problem-solving to become even better problem solvers even better. Given that experience is often the best teacher, this was an ambitious expectation. It was a bold idea that providing academic training after many years of field experience can further enhance their solution skills. In this light, it was important to think evaluatively about basic questions: *By what mechanisms does an academic program actually enhance the solutioning skills of leaders and practitioneers? In what*

ways does working collaboratively with a range of diverse colleagues help their ability to learn about problem-solving in their own settings

> When a practitioner makes sense of a situation he perceives to be unique, he sees it as something already present in his repertoire. To see this site as that one is not to subsume the first under a familiar category or rule. It is, rather, to see the unfamiliar, unique situation as both similar to and different from the familiar one, without at first being able to say similar or different with respect to what. The familiar situation functions as a precedent, or a metaphor, or… an exemplar for the unfamiliar one. (Schön 1983: 138)

Table 1 provides a quick summary of the types of questions that an evaluation of an EdD program needs to explore.

Table 1: Evaluation Questions to Evaluate the EdD Program

Judging success • Why did you join the program? • What did success mean to you when you started this program? Have these criteria of success been met according to you?   ○ How? • Has your definition of what constitutes success changed over time?
Value added to Individuals • In what ways did the program help the students' abilities to solve problems in their settings? • Did it help their ability to analyze problems and conceptualize solutions? • Did it increase their confidence to solve problems? Did it enhance their confidence as leaders? • Did it make them better consumers of evidence? • Did it enhance their ability to negotiate and collaborate with partners to solve problems? • What were the unintended negative impacts of the program? • Was the focus on taking an indigenous-lens sufficient?
Value added to Systems • What specific skills did the program provide to help solve systemic problems? • Did the program help improve Educational systems? How? • Did it help students understand how to address bottlenecks within systems? • Did it provide a deeper understanding of contextual/systemic challenges? • In what ways did it help with addressing social inequities?
Supports

• Did the students feel sufficiently supported during the program? • Did they feel sufficiently supported after the completion of their Doctoral degree?
Mechanisms • In what ways did the program bring clarity on the role of values in guiding action? • In what specific ways did the program bring a social justice dimension to their work? • Did the collaborative ethos of the program help them become better collaborators?
Learning and Spread • What are the lessons from this program for traditional PhD programs in Education? • What are lessons learned for other practice-based programs? What specific aspects of such a program are relevant for a program focused on public health?
Ideas for improvement • What were specific suggestions to improve the program? • What more can be done to bring a specific social justice perspective to the work? • What more can be done to enhance focus on indigenous practice? • Were their specific skills they think they should have learned that they were not taught? • What specific post-doctoral supports could be provided to enhance the program? What support systems are needed to help improve the program? • How could the program better balance rigor and utility?

4. Discussion

Emancipation as a goal

In the cold gaze of measurement, emancipation is a tall goal. What kinds of emancipation can a practice-based program really aspire to? My interest in this paper is broader than EdD. I am interested in practice-based doctoral programs. Let me start by acknowledging that the pandemic and Black Lives Matter provide an opportunity to ask far reaching questions on the value of practice-based education. My bias is the need for practical knowledge that is adaptive and nimble (as a response to the pandemic) and the need for research practitioners who can be driven by addressing issues of gender, equity and inclusion has never been greater.

I have argued in this paper that evaluations and evaluative thinking itself can promote such a journey towards long-term goals. The goal in such an evaluation is not to have a measurement system that promotes mechanical thought or rhetorical responses – instead it is an opportunity to vision and make course-corrections as programs repeatedly ask how the structure, curriculum and learning processes become more nimble and responsive to the needs of vulnerable.

Emancipation as a principle is a wonderful aspirational. An evaluation needs to help make this journey from a less than ideal reality to aspiration. It is important if we accept the vision of emancipation as a goal, we move beyond rhetoric towards such a goal. The Norwegian playwright's Henrik Ibsen warning about emancipation is worth remembering: *"Ah, I fancy it is just the same with most of what you call your emancipation. You have read yourself into a number of new ideas and opinions. You have got a sort of smattering of recent discoveries in various fields - discoveries that seem to overthrow certain principles which have hitherto been held impregnable and unassailable. But all this has only been a matter of intellect, Miss West - superficial acquisition. It has not passed into your blood"*

How do we ensure that emancipation is not rhetorical but actually serves as a north star for practice-based programs? How can such a goal be 'hardwired' into the purpose of practice-based programs? For starters, it has to ask basic questions of how a practice-based program can lead to emancipation given the structural barriers. *Such knowledge needs to come from individuals/students who have made this journey*

What matters? Rethinking Criteria: Moving beyond rigor and relevance

Schon (1995) has asked whether it is the relevance or the rigor of programs that matter?

> *In the varied typography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground overlooking a swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the use of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowlands, problems are messy and confusing and incapable of technical solution. The irony of this situation is that the problems of the high ground tend to be relatively unimportant to individuals or society at large, however great their technical interest may be, while in the swamp lie the problems of greatest human concern. The practitioner is confronted with a choice. Shall he remain on the high ground where he can solve relatively unimportant problems according to his standards of rigor, or shall he descend to the swamp of important problems where he cannot be rigorous in any way he knows how to describe? (p. 28)*

I like Schon's metaphor of the "*swamp of important problems*." However, I am not convinced that this is a simple matter of rigor or relevance. For starters, I think we need to challenge what rigor and utility mean? Embracing the metaphor of the swamp raises a number of important questions around practice including how can practitioners make the journey ***through*** the complexities of the swamp? I stress the idea of 'through' because I remain unconvinced that the challenge is really one about the choice of rigor and relevance or even this criteria will really be sufficient to make it through the swamp.

We need to rethink what we mean by rigor. How can our definitions of rigor be informed by what it takes to make the journey through the swamp? This was not a matter of comfortable philosophical discourse but understanding the discourse of community and social change. As the Statistical Clark Glymour wrote in a debate on causality, *"People talk as they will, and if they talk in a way that does not fit some piece of philosophical analysis, and seem to understand one another well enough when they do, then there is something going on that the analysis has not caught. That is not a failing of the speakers. It is, if anything, a failing of we who philosophize, even if we philosophize with statistics."*

The journeys made by students should serve as the way forward. basic methodology was to taking a learning lens. It is equally important to pay attention to the political economy of knowledge production. It also meant not to reify knowledge generation as clearly separate from implementation. If one takes

the journey through the swamp, then knowledge itself has to respond to contexts. Abstractions cannot be bottled as rigor or relevance. The language of change needs to be informed by the journey through the swamp.

5. Conclusions: Implications for Improvement

There is a sense that the time is now to raise these questions, and it is important that academia hold itself to account in challenging itself to enhance its focus on more meaningful social change. *My sense is that assuming that all academic activity is socially meaningful or adds value to society is a stale idea whose time has passed.* I believe that a focus on thinking evaluatively needs to pay attention to what more can be done to move from rhetoric to a real social justice perspective. Critical questions to address as we think evaluatively include: How has the program contributed to the needs of the most marginalized groups? In what tangible ways can practice-based programs be better structured to address such needs?

We believe that even an informal evaluation of the EdD program will have important consequences for practice-based doctoral education. Now that the EdD program at the University of Hawaii has completed a decade, with the third cohort about to graduate, the time is right to reflect on the value added of this doctoral programs as well as the lessons for other doctoral programs. Given that the students in this program already were educational leaders, it is important to learn how such a program enhances their capacities and capabilities to transform the educational system in Hawaii.

Further, given the unique cultural landscape in Hawaii with its focus on indigenous culture, there are lessons to learn on how a program focused on leadership capabilities can make the difference in the

lives of native Hawaiians and other indigenous groups. At a time in which the world is asking questions around systemic racism, it is important to reflect deeply around how a doctoral program can add value in re-shaping and reforming issues of structural inequities in the educational system.

I believe that such an evaluation also will throw light on how best academic programs can be structured to balance rigor with utility; balance reflection with pragmatic action. My view is that there is a desperate need to move beyond stale discussions of what constitutes rigorous knowledge that often are self-serving to more traditional views of academia. We need a view of rigor that is respectful of the challenges of practice; the challenges of journeying through the swamps. In my judgement, the practitioner scholars from the University of Hawaii EdD program are well positioned to provide such feedback.

Equally important is a need to challenge the elitism that a practice-based program is somehow intellectually inferior to a more traditionally based PhD and more traditional notions of scholarship. I believe that thinking from an evaluative lens will demonstrate humility of learning that is needed at a time in which there are larger questions being asked systemically about the value added of academia and how academia contributes to social changes. It is also vital that such an evaluation raises questions around the capacities needed within doctoral programs to provide supports to practitioner scholars after the completion of their dissertation. What specific examples of capacity are needed to help ensure that students put into practice lessons learned from their doctoral training. Are financially sustainable models of capacity possible that would help ensure the viability of such dynamic supports?

Such an evaluation would provide other insights including how best can learnings about addressing bottlenecks be incorporated into a doctoral curriculum; how future practice-based programs need to be structured to enhance utility in real world settings; and the types of specific courses that students find helpful in addressing their contextual challenges.

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