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**THREE YEARS OUT AND EIGHT THOUSAND MILES AWAY:  
HOW ACTION RESEARCH AND SUPPORT DEVELOPED A SCHOLARLY  
AND INFLUENTIAL PRACTITIONER**

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**Abstract**

Due to the globalization of knowledge and opportunities to work around the world, the practical and technical skills needed by school leaders is growing, and because of this, many are seeking advanced degrees. This paper presents the story of a 2011 graduate from an educational doctorate (Ed.D.) program who now works in Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, 8,000 miles from where he graduated. The story or narrative in this manuscript is distinct from empirical or other types of research. It simply captures the experience of two individuals in a unique time and place. Mike's story is used to explain how his action research dissertation skills changed his workplace, both near and far. Paralleling this is the story of a faculty mentor named Debby. Through these two stories, the local and global impact of the Ed.D. is illuminated.

## INTRODUCTION

Educational leaders work in a variety of contexts and their work matters to children, adolescents, and adults (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Fullen, 2001; Torff, 2011). Due to the globalization of knowledge, similarity of educational problems, and opportunities to work around the world, the practical and technical skills needed by educators have grown. Because of this, many of them are seeking advanced degrees, such as the education doctorate (Ed.D.) (Maxwell, 2003; Willis, Inman, & Valenti, 2010). In the United States, the Ed.D. has become the degree of choice, because newly designed or redesigned programs allow educators to remain in the field as they pursue their degrees, focus their course and dissertation work on problems of practice, receive cohort support, and achieve their degrees in a reasonable amount of time (Zambo & Isea, 2013; Gardner, 2009; Jarvis, 1999; Latta & Wunder, 2012).

The purpose of this paper is to explain the new vision of the Ed.D. as developed by the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED), and explain how one of its affiliate institutions utilized its ideas to develop scholarly and influential practitioners. To accomplish these goals, two narratives will be provided. The narratives are distinct from empirical or other types of research. They capture the experience of two individuals in a unique time and place with a unique experience to tell. The first one comes from a faculty member in the program and the other from a 2011 graduate of the program who is now working in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, 8,000 miles from where he graduated.

### **A New Vision of the Ed.D.**

Thanks to CPED, the Ed.D. is being re-envisioned, re-defined, and reclaimed as a distinct professional degree for the next generation of school leaders (Perry, 2011, 2012). Today's Ed.D. graduates are envisioned to become *scholarly practitioners*, that is individuals who have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need to name, frame, and resolve the problems of practice they are facing (Perry, 2011, 2012; Perry & Imig, 2008; Shulman, Golde, Bueschel, & Garabedian, 2006). To develop these qualities, programs affiliated with CPED are using a guiding framework that includes six working principles and six design features. The principles state that the professional doctorate in education:

1. Is framed around questions of equity, ethics, and social justice to bring about solutions to complex problems of practice.
2. Prepares leaders who can construct and apply knowledge to make a positive difference in the lives of individuals, families, organizations, and communities.
3. Provides opportunities for candidates to develop and demonstrate collaboration and communication skills to work with diverse communities and to build partnerships.

4. Provides field-based opportunities to analyze problems of practice and use multiple frames to develop meaningful solutions.
5. Is grounded in and develops a professional knowledge base that integrates both practical and research knowledge, that links theory with systemic and systematic inquiry.
6. Emphasizes the generation, transformation, and use of professional knowledge and practice.

The design features include: Scholarly Practitioner, Signature Pedagogy, Inquiry as Practice, Laboratory of Practice, and Dissertation in Practice. Signature pedagogy stems from the work of Shulman (2005) who defined it as the pervasive set of practices experts in a field use to prepare newcomers for all aspects of their work. Inquiry as Practice is the process of asking significant questions about complex problems. Laboratories of Practice are places that facilitate transformative and generative learning and allow theory and practice to be combined. Dissertations in Practice are the culminating experience of a doctoral program and demonstrate that a scholarly practitioner is able to think, perform, and act with integrity (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, 2010).

CPED-influence programs have these commonalities but they are not monolithic clones of each other (Shulman, et al., 2006). CPED programs share a common vision and aim to develop researching professionals as opposed to professional researchers (Bourner, Bowden, & Laing 2001; Jarvis, 1999) As Kirk (2011) stated, the aim of the Ed.D. is to change the world, as opposed to studying it.

### **The Mentor's Narrative**

As a member of the CPED consortium, Arizona State University has adopted CPED's vision and blended it with its own. Our program is nested within a large urban university whose mission is to be socially embedded and globally responsive. Aligned with this mission is our Ed.D. in Leadership and Innovation, which aspires to develop scholarly and influential practitioners. Our learning outcomes state that as a result of our program, successful candidates will be able to:

As leaders:

- Provide strategic leadership in educational settings.
- Contribute leadership for innovative practices to address educational issues in a socially responsive manner.
- Support community leadership through the integration of innovation in schools and communities.
- Render a vision for leadership that underscores national trends in educational innovation to confront regional and local community issues.

#### As Change Agents:

- Understand the change process, how educational innovation stimulates change, including the relationship of mission, vision, leadership, goals and objectives to decision making.
- Lead and manage change and create collaborative action that supports community advancement.

#### As Data-Based Decision Makers:

- Understand and advocate for research-based best practices to support instruction and standards-based curriculum leading to high levels of student achievement.
- Conduct and mix quantitative and qualitative research on actions intended to effect educational excellence in the key areas of inquiry.
- Improve the quality of services within the educational communities with the effective use of technology and other innovations.
- Implement data-based decision making through professional practice with the effective use of technology and other innovations.

#### As Collaborators:

- Consult with other professionals in schools, businesses, and government agencies to address mutual concerns regarding educational decision-making.
- Understand, create, and support professional development communities of practice incorporating the needs of adult learners who desire to improve learning and teaching in innovative ways.

As a faculty member in this program, I, like my colleagues, envision that our graduates, who are full-time working professionals, will remain in the field after they graduate and continue to innovate, work for social justice, and lead change through collaboration. To develop this potential, coursework focuses on innovation, leadership, and action research.

Action research is the pervasive signature pedagogy in our program. It is taught in core courses (12 hours) and research courses (9 hours), supported in Leader-Scholar Communities (LSC) (6 hours), and leads to dissertation work (12 hours). In the first semester, students perform a cycle of action research. They select a problem of practice to address in their workplace, explain why it is important to them and their constitutes, investigate the literature for viable solutions, utilize the information to take action, collect and analyze data, report their findings, and determine their next steps. This cycle is

typically performed two more times during the program with the final cycle being the dissertation.

Action research is signature pedagogy in our program because its epistemological and philosophical assumptions align with our mission to develop scholarly and influential practitioners. Action research is a participatory democratic process concerned with developing practical knowledge in the pursuit of worthwhile purposes (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). This is important for programs aimed at developing school leaders, because, as Coghlan (2007) and Pine (2009) have noted, action research deepens students' ability to take action and be reflective. Grogan and Andrews (2002) found that Ed.D. students who perform action research develop into leaders who solve problems and bridge the divide between theory and practice. Furman (2011, 2012) argued for action research in leadership programs, reasoning that its emphasis on equity, collaboration, and data-based decisions are the skills effective leaders need.

Yet, as most Ed.D. students realize, performing action research can be difficult, because, as researching professionals, they have one foot in the world of practice and the other in the world of academe (Jarvis, 1999; Labaree, 2003). To help bridge this divide, our program uses Leader Scholar Communities. LSCs are formed at the end of students' first years in the program, and are comprised of small groups of five to seven students and a pair of faculty who become their chair and second committee member. The word "leader" in this group's title is intentional because students are respected as such. The focus of the LSC is student action research and in them, students have opportunities to lead discussions, learn new information, and share their knowledge with peers. LSC members support each other intellectually, socially, and emotionally (Amrein-Beardsley, et al., 2012).

### **Previous Research on Students in Ph.D. and Ed.D. Programs**

Most studies of doctoral students focus on students in Ph.D. programs, but a few have examined students pursuing Professional Practice Degrees (PPD), or Ed.D.s. Scott, Brown, Lunt, and Thorne (2004) investigated why students in business, engineering and education sought a PPD. These researchers found students' reasons to be both extrinsic and intrinsic and falling along a continuum that varied by years of experience. Individuals new to their professions typically sought a PPD for extrinsic-professional reasons. They wanted to gain experience and advance in their careers. However, many mid-career individuals also pursued a doctorate for career reasons, but in addition, they wanted to contribute to their field. In contrast, well-established professionals sought a degree for intrinsic-personal/professional reasons. They valued learning, wanted an intellectual challenge, set personal and professional goals, and wanted to change fields. The research these established professionals conducted was driven by curiosity and was transformative for them. It led to contextual improvements, self-discovery, and personal and professional change.

With a similar focus, Wellington and Sikes (2006) investigated the motivations, aspirations, and identities of twenty-nine students seeking PPDs. Like Scott et al., (2004) they found that students sought higher degrees for various reasons including: job promotion, job retention, a desire for intellectual challenge, and a quest to gain insight into the theories of their field. Students sought PPDs because they felt frustrated with the

way things were and wanted to make things better. These students valued the cohort structure their programs offered and felt that the programs afforded them collegiality, diverse viewpoints, and support.

Although fewer in number, there have been studies that focused on students in CPED-influenced programs. For example, at the University of Nebraska Lincoln, Heaton and Swindler (2012) looked at their program and discovered that the use of inquiry helped their students move beyond intuition, acquire new perspectives, and think critically about the problems of practice they were facing. At the same university, Chan (2012) conducted a study aimed at documenting the problems of practice students were facing and the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they were gaining as they engaged in inquiry into their own practice. Results showed that as students worked on their problems, they engaged in reflection, broadened their perspectives, and learned to negotiate the policies influencing their contexts.

Research on our own program also provides interesting results. For example, using a survey, Amrein-Beardsley, et al., (2012) discovered that our first cohort, class of 2009 (N = 20), valued the curricular and instructional features of our program, engaged in actions to improve their settings, valued the sense of community that developed, and reported transformations to their identities. To investigate identity changes further, a survey study followed by interviews with graduates of the class of 2011 (N=19) was conducted. Data from this work showed that graduates experienced identity shifts in their perceptions of themselves as learners, leaders, and action researchers. Mike was a participant in this study. It was after this that that Mike and I decided to collaborate to further investigate and explain his identity shifts. Mike's story was chosen because he has taken the knowledge, skills, and dispositions he learned at Arizona State University and applied them in Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, 8,000 miles away from where he graduated.

### **The Student's Story**

I have always considered myself a lifelong learner. I say this because I went straight from high school to college, received a Bachelor's degree, then immediately went on to pursue a Master's degree in Secondary Education. After this I began teaching, but I kept taking courses and I continued to learn from my students and my colleagues. In the classroom, I studied my craft and honed my skills as a teacher, but as the years went by I realized this was not enough. I wanted to be intellectually challenged and develop the skills and wisdom I needed to increase the achievement of my students and help the teachers with whom I was working achieve this same goal. I wanted to learn how theory could be used to inform my practice and understand how research could be used to improve lives. These desires brought me to the Ed.D. in Leadership and Innovation at Arizona State University.

The faculty in the program must have known my goals because the introductory course, and, every course thereafter, focused on action research, innovation, change, and leadership. The three-year program had just what I wanted and I (we) hit the ground running. During my first semester, I conducted my first cycle of action research focusing on professional learning communities (PLCs). I began reading the research and theory behind PLCs along with their potential benefits and challenges. With this knowledge, I

established a grade level PLC within my middle-school team. I was my team's leader and we met weekly and focused on what I thought to be key student achievement. Because this was my first action research cycle, I learned how to collect and analyze data, and through this discovered that my colleagues felt that our PLC was beneficial. However, when I delved deeper and collected and analyzed more data, I came to understand that the teachers viewed our PLC as something I had established rather than a professional development opportunity for them. What appeared to be working on the surface was shown to be much more complex. There were still teachers feeling undervalued and students not meeting their learning goals.

Fortunately, action research is cyclical and my courses required me to conduct a second cycle. Cycle two was somewhat easier, because even though there were flaws in my initial action, I had established the structure for our PLC. Given what I knew about how the teachers perceived our PLC, I worked to develop a way our team could use its time for professional development. To begin, the teachers and I began to voice our concerns, and then I let the teachers set their own goals and agendas. This made a tremendous difference. Discussions became livelier and engagement increased. This was a giant step forward for our PLC and for my evolution as a leader and researcher. Taking the lessons learned from cycle one and applying them to cycle two helped me make a small but meaningful alteration. True to the vision of action research, I was naming, framing, and working on a problem of practice that had meaning to me.

At the beginning of my second year, I was placed in my Leader Scholar Community. My LSC was composed of our Chair and five students who were administrators, and teachers like myself with varying years of experience and expertise. However, despite our differences, we as students, had many commonalities. Each one of us was trying to sharpen our research capabilities, develop our leadership skills, and make our workplaces better. Our group met weekly and it was during these meetings that the focus of my dissertation began to emerge. I had spent two cycles of action research forming and improving our grade level professional community, and even though I had been somewhat successful, my Leader Scholar Community helped me realize that I was making a large assumption. I was assuming the teachers in our PLC were collaborating, when in reality, I had no data to prove that they were. This idea seemed critical, which led me to the literature on teacher collaboration. As I read about collaboration, I brought ideas back to my LSC and because they were all working in schools, the members each had personal insights into my topic. Their ideas and the literature helped me realize that the teachers at my school needed collaborative tools and goals.

Over the next two semesters, and with the support of my LSC, I worked to infuse collaborative norms and goal setting into our PLC. As I implemented ideas with my team over 15 weeks, I collected both quantitative and qualitative data. Table 1 provides a description of each data source, its contents and duration.

Table 2

## Inventory of Data Sources

Data source	Description	Contents	Duration
Research Journal	Recordings of professional development activities and professional learning team meetings.	14 pages, single spaced	420 minutes
Artifacts	Lesson plans, team logs, quick checks and revision of the team norms were collected to understand how, and if, instructional planning and collaborative behaviors changed.	19 pages	
Surveys	Three surveys were used to understand the teachers' perceptions on the professional development provided, the instructional planning tools and the experience and benefits of working as a professional learning team.	32 pages	30 minutes per participant
Meeting Transcriptions	Three team meetings were audio recorded and transcribed.	46 pages, single spaced	125 minutes
Interviews	Three sets of interviews were conducted. Each interview had a different focus (e.g., prior knowledge and experience with collaboration, professional development in effective collaboration, instructional learning tools, and working as a team).	65 pages, single spaced	232 minutes

For the quantitative data, descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, effect size) were computed. Qualitative data were analyzed using a constant comparative approach. From this analysis I found that setting and revisiting norms of collaboration were leading to collegiality and increased buy-in and active participation. Taking time to meet and share our experiences allowed the teachers and myself to assist one another and develop professionally. In certain ways, the PLC began to look a lot like my LSC. Its members learned from and with each other and challenged each other intellectually. In the end I had what I felt to be a solid dissertation titled *The Contribution of Professional Development to a Middle School Team's Collaboration and Instructional Learning*. Its introduction reads:

Teachers working in isolation to overcome instructional challenges are left to their own devices, but teachers working together can benefit from others' perspectives. Teacher collaboration can increase communication and open doors to increased collective knowledge and rapport (Butler, Lauscher, Jarvis-Selinger, & Beckingham 2004; Jolly 2001; Richardson 2001). Collaborative knowledge sharing and decision-making that focus on student achievement can go far in improving instructional learning.

My dissertation would not have been possible without the support of my LSC. My LSC helped me understand my assumptions and turn to the literature, as well as keep me on track. Many times, my LSC helped me re-imagine possibilities and re-vitalize myself.

When my dissertation was written and defended, my journey at Arizona State University came to an end. However, the goal of the program continues to live in my mind and heart. I am now using the skills, knowledge, and dispositions I developed in Arizona in Abu Dhabi, 8,000 miles away from where I graduated.

I currently teach English to non-English speakers, and this is both interesting and challenging. Instead of blue jeans and t-shirts, my students attend classes dressed in long kanduras (ankle-length garments similar to robes) and have guthra (head scarves) wrapped around their heads. In other words, my students are linguistically and culturally different from my English-speaking colleagues and myself. An area where our perceptions differ greatly is in the students' responsibility for their own work. My students will cover for one another, and in doing so, create situations where a handful of students end up doing the majority of the work.

Being an action researcher, I decided to focus on improving this situation. With my new colleagues, I decided to try to increase the engagement and responsibility of all students. To get us started, I developed a presentation called, *Learn to Collaborate, Collaborate to Learn* and delivered it to my new team. We then decided to seek out resources and meet weekly to discuss and share our readings. Keeping in line with an action-inquiry cycle, we also developed norms of collaboration, tried strategies, collected informal data on our work together and made adjustments. Thanks to this, I am proud to say we are beginning to see change. The students are now accountable and responsible for their own work. Interestingly, our PLC continues to learn and disseminate what we discovered. Each member of our team recently attended a seminar on student engagement where we shared what we learned with several of our Arabic colleagues. Through the use of an action-inquiry cycle, I was able to broaden my sphere of influence. Others have

taken notice, and because of this, I was asked to facilitate the formation of several PLCs with both English and Arabic teachers. To date, I have helped one group work on student behavior and helped another group develop assessments and rubrics for science classes. Each of the PLCs I have worked with has chosen a different problem of practice to focus on, but several things remain consistent - the need for support, collaborative norms, and self-selection of goals that are relevant to the work of teachers.

When I began my doctoral program, I commonly introduced myself as, “just a classroom teacher”; however, since I received my Ed.D., I now take pride in the fact that I am a scholarly and influential practitioner. I started my story with the statement that I have always considered myself a lifelong learner, and seeing myself in this way still holds true today. My classroom, my students, and my colleagues offer opportunities for me to research, learn, and improve.

## CONCLUSION

The globalization of knowledge, similarity of educational problems, and opportunity for professionals to work around the world is leading to the need to produce quality leaders, or, scholarly and influential practitioners (Perry, 2011, 2012). Thanks to CPED, a new vision of the Ed.D. has been envisioned and Mike’s story, written three years after graduation, captures what this means.

Like the more established students in studies by Scott et al. (2004) and Wellington and Sikes (2006), Mike’s story shows that he sought an Ed.D. for intrinsic, personal/professional reasons. Mike wanted to improve at what he did, be intellectually challenged, learn about theory and research, and contribute to his field. Mike sought an Ed.D. because it aligned with his values and goals of being a life-long learner and leader. He also chose to pursue a doctorate because he wanted to remain in the field, and work to increase student achievement and teacher professionalism. Doing action research and writing an action research dissertation was affirming, fit his needs, and led to transformation (Coghlan, 2007; Furman, 2011, 2012; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Pine, 2009). Fortunately, Mike was encouraged to move from a normative to an analytical perspective, and from an experiential to a theoretical and data-driven point of view. Being provided the opportunity to choose his own problem of practice and blend his professional and practical knowledge led to self-discovery and respect for himself as a teacher and action researcher 8,000 miles away from where he graduated.

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**Debby Zambo** is a Professor Emerita from Arizona State University and is currently working as the Associate Director of the Carnegie Foundation on the Education Doctorate (CPED). Debby received her Ph.D. from Arizona State University and prior to her retirement worked there for 10 years as an associate professor in the Division of Educational Leadership and Innovation in Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College. While at ASU, Debby served as Coordinator of their Ed.D. program for two and a half years. Debby's research interests include newly designed Ed.D. programs and the application of educational psychology to educational practice. Since 2012, she has worked closely with Dr. Jill Perry, Director of CPED, helping with various aspects of the organization, including grant writing, convenings, and committees.

**A. Michael Riskus** is a Senior Lecturer of English at the Petroleum Institute University and Research Center. After receiving his Ed.D. from Arizona State University in 2011, he took his career to Abu Dhabi. Mike remains a classroom teacher in the United Arab Emirates and continues to affect change through the formation of professional learning communities and the use of action research. Mike's research interests include action research for the ESL classroom, teacher collaboration, and the use of professional learning communities for professional development.

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