



Gifts of the Doctoral Process

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Abstract

The doctoral dissertation process has been a journey of self-recognition. The gifts I received from the action research based doctoral process shifted my self- perspective from one of 'imposter' to that of 'doctor-educator.' These gifts included: validation as an educator, researcher and writer; confidence to pursue further questions; the possibility of affecting school practices and personal evolution; the opportunity to actualize personal values; and the generation of a living-educational-theory.

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Introduction

I entered the first Ed.D. cohort at the University of Hawai'i in 2011 at the age of 49 after nearly 20 years as an educator. Unbeknownst to me, the program's dissertation requirement focused on using action research. This became definitive to my experience. Early on McNiff and Whitehead's *You and Your Action Research Project* (2010) emerged as my principal methodology-text. I learned that action research honours the life-experience brought into the research-process by the researcher as well as the culture and community of the participants. Little did I know that through the doctoral dissertation process I was about to embark on a journey of self-recognition, including viewing myself as a doctor-educator (Whitehead & Huxtable, 2014).

Validation as an Educator, Researcher, and Writer

I obtained a masters degree in sociology in 1986 and held a variety of jobs before and after that, but by 2011 I had worked as a high-school teacher within a private college preparatory school for seven years, as well as an administrator and teacher within a Steiner elementary school for 13 years (typically called "Waldorf Education" in the United States). Steiner schools, or Waldorf Education, are based on a philosophy and method articulated by Rudolf Steiner called anthroposophy.

During my tenure at the Steiner school, I served on the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America's (AWSNA) Leadership Council, co-chaired the Development and Administrative Network of AWSNA, licensed schools as a board member of the Hawai'i Council of Private Schools, and co-founded the Maui Independent Schools Organization. However, I did not have any teacher training, nor Waldorf certification. In essence, I felt like an 'imposter' —a woman given these opportunities accidentally, or because no one else was around to do them (Clance & Imes, 1978).

But action research validated my experience as a practitioner and as a Waldorf administrator of many years. I was drawn to McNiff and Whitehead's (2010) characterizations of action research. They describe action research as: 'practice based, and practice is understood as action and research,' ... 'about improving practice,' ... 'emphasiz[ing] the values of practice,' ... 'collaborative, and focuse[d] on the co-creation of knowledge of practices,' ... 'intentionally political,' ... 'requir[ing] people to hold themselves accountable for what they are doing and accept responsibility for their own actions,' and finally 'contribut[ing] to social and cultural transformation' (p. 17).

What I knew about Waldorf had come through real life experience on the job; from reading books and articles on my own; by attending conferences, workshops, and meetings; and through observing children, teachers, and parents go through life within a Waldorf school over many years. What I knew about schools I learned by working in them, by licensing them, by serving on accreditation teams that studied them, and by frequent conversation with other educators and administrators nationally, statewide, and locally. Within the context of action research, and as an active participant in the community I was studying, I wrote, *The Financial Sustainability of Maui's Small Independent Schools* (Demirbag, 2014).

The research-process included a literature-review, identifying a conceptual framework, designing the action research plan, interviewing participants within samples, analyzing financial data, testing for validity, and of course, data-analysis. I formed conclusions, shared them with participant communities, and presented them to colleagues in Hawai'i and in Oxford. Because action research focuses on problem-solving and improving practice (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010), I also provided recommendations to schools on Maui and to the Hawai'i Association of Independent Schools. In short, like anyone who has gone through the dissertation process, I proved myself as a researcher.

Writing *The Financial Sustainability of Maui's Small Independent Schools* required adherence to APA format and a rigorous submission-process. Advisors read, critiqued, questioned, and suggested revisions. After submitting my dissertation, I began to write for publication. A chapter was accepted for publication in a book, an article was published within a trade magazine, an article currently awaits publication in a Waldorf magazine, and another article awaits publication as a blog-piece for a national educational-organization. The doctoral dissertation-process led me to writing as a professional and as an academic.

Ultimately, through the doctoral dissertation-process, I can finally say that I am not an imposter in the field of education. I am actually a doctor in the field of education – —a Doctor-Educator as referred to by Whitehead and Huxtable (2014), and further, I am a professional practitioner. Professionalism in education is enhanced 'when we focus on the importance of continually creating and making public our embodied knowledge as educators through our practitioner-research' (Whitehead & Huxtable, 2014, p. 14).

Confidence to Pursue Questions

With the validation of myself as a valid participant in the Waldorf world and as a researcher, I gained a confidence that allowed me to withstand the judgment of others. I had proved myself in a way that most had not, and I could acknowledge myself as an equal to those I had looked up to for many years. I humbly accepted the words of my advisor, 'I'm honored to call you colleague,' (N. Murata, personal communication, November 11, 2014). I suddenly felt *authorized and free* to pursue my interests and areas of question.

My dissertation ended with the acknowledgement that behind my central finding of the significance of a clearly articulated and relevant mission to a small school's sustainability, lay 'an important and esoteric side note' (Demirbag, 2014, p. 134):

[S]ome 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' (p. 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' (2007, p. 113). Waldorf schools hold the belief that there was a being or spirit or at its core. (p. 134)

Although the scope of my dissertation did not allow for the time or space to develop this side note, my confidence as a Waldorf participant and as a researcher encouraged me to continue exploring the concept of a spiritual being standing behind a school. Prior to

completing a dissertation, I would never have felt that I could speak publicly as someone interested in an esoteric topic typically discussed (or left alone) by Waldorf 'experts.'

I decided to explore the topic further in the format of a workshop. The chair of my school's College of Teachers agreed to join me in developing and presenting the workshop at the annual regional Waldorf conference held in Hawai'i. She was an identified school-leader in anthroposophy. Because I had not formally trained in anthroposophy or Waldorf- methods, I wanted the credibility of a trained Waldorf-practitioner to guide our work.

My favorite definition of anthroposophy is one that views the individual within the cosmos, and the cosmos within the individual:

Anthroposophy embraces a spiritual view of the human being and the cosmos. Humanity (anthropos) has the inherent wisdom (sophia) to transform both itself and the world. 'Anthroposophy is a path of knowledge to guide the spiritual in the human being to the spiritual in the universe' (Rudolf Steiner). (Haleakala Waldorf School Handbook, 2012-13)

It is a definition that in my experience as a hula practitioner resonates deeply with Hawaiian cultural beliefs. Kana'iaupuni and Malone (2006) state 'Cosmogenic and religious beliefs of Native Hawaiians tie the Hawaiian Islands to *Kanaka Maoli*' (native Hawaiians) (p. 5). They cite Kame'eleihiwa in describing the connection between the universe and the individual as being genealogical: '...the genealogy of the Land, the Gods, Chiefs, and people intertwine with one another, and with all the myriad aspects of the universe' (p. 5).

We also asked the identified Hawaiian cultural practitioner-teacher of the school to join us in our workshop. I felt this was especially important because I am not a Native Hawaiian. My father is from the Philippines and my mother is from a white pioneering family in the American state of Florida. But after courting in Louisville, Kentucky where I was born, they moved to Hawai'i when I was an infant, leaving me with no memories of any other culture. Raised on the island of Maui, I trained from childhood through adulthood as a hula dancer and singer of Hawaiian music, frequently performing professionally and teaching others. While this cultural practitioner-teacher is also not a Native Hawaiian, she is formally trained in the art, practice and traditions of hula, having gone through the rigorous process of *uniki* (graduation) and has achieved the title of *kumu* (teacher or source) as bestowed by a Native Hawaiian practitioner who also formally achieved this title.

The three of us felt strongly that we needed active *kanaka maoli* participation in our discussions and exploration. As stated by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), research on topics important to indigenous peoples should include the participation of indigenous people and should be shared with indigenous people. We wanted to hear the thoughts of a cultural expert on *wahi pana* (sacred or storied places). We arranged an interview with Professor Kiope Raymond of the University of Hawaii Maui College. Not only was he a Native Hawaiian with formal expertise on *wahi pana*, but his family originates from the location of the school, and his grandmother taught for many years at the school. During the interview, Kiope shared:

There are concepts in the Hawaiian culture that people are now articulating so that we in the 21st century better understand it, the idea of residual spiritual energy in a place that is there when good things have happened, when people have been *pono* (righteous, goodness, and also balanced) in their lives. That concept of being in a universal harmony, with interpersonal relationships with their spirituality, with that which nourishes them, the *'aina* (land), and

everything the 'aina represents. They are compelled, impelled, to take care of the 'aina (malama 'aina), so all of that together makes something *pono*. (Personal communication, February 10, 2015)

Preparing and executing the workshop included researching what Waldorf practitioners had to say about understanding the spiritual being behind a school, interviewing a Hawaiian language and cultural expert on the concepts of 'aumakua and wahi pana, presenting and experiencing a powerful hula about a revered place, guided meditation, walking and experiencing the grounds of the school, and dialogue with workshop participants. This method of research is supported by Bruce Ferguson (2008) in the British Educational Research Association, and particularly relevant to indigenous research:

It takes courage and open-mindedness for people accustomed to and trained in 'traditional' research processes to consider and even embrace alternative ways of researching, and of presenting that research. But it will validate forms of research that can convey knowledge not easily encapsulated just within pages of written text and work to overcome those whose knowledge and skills have been, in the past, inappropriately excluded (p. 25).

While we have not yet formalized any conclusions based on this research, we intend to do so and publish our findings within a Waldorf research-publication.

Together we created a workshop called Meeting the Being of a Hawaiian Waldorf School. We wanted to explore how the streams of anthroposophy and Hawaiian Culture shape our understanding of our school's spiritual being. Essentially, I theorized that the spiritual being that resided in the land beneath our school according to Hawaiian cultural belief, impacted the essence of the school that now sat upon it. Further, I hypothesized that the efforts of a Waldorf school accumulate over time to add to the *mana* (spiritual power) of that place, slowly transforming the school into a *wahi pana*, or storied and sacred place.

My living-educational-theory evolved over almost 20 years of working in a Waldorf school, trying to integrate my experience as a 'local' familiar with Hawaiian cultural practices, and the anthroposophical readings I had done, as well as with feelings of a sacred and reverent nature I experienced in my *na'au*—the pit of my stomach—when working on the campus. Like anthroposophy, indigenous cultures view themselves as part of the cosmos. Their stories, mythology, songs, and chants acknowledge that all of creation, and human beings within that creation, are one. Foley (2003) states:

Indigenous philosophy has three interacting worlds: the Physical World, the Human World, and the Sacred World. The physical world is the base that is land, the creation. The land is the mother, and we are of the land. We do not own the land, the land owns us. The land is our food, our culture, our spirit and our identity. (p. 46)

Why It Matters

There are at least five reasons why pursuing an ‘esoteric side-note’ lends value to my practice as a Waldorf administrator, to my participation in the culture of where I live, and for humanity in general. Six months after submitting my dissertation, I accepted a position as the administrator for a different Waldorf-school in Hawai‘i. The school had lost some enrollment since ‘the Great Recession’ in 2008–2009. Diving into the spiritual essence of what lies at the core of financial sustainability provides me with the opportunity to actually apply my dissertation research to my current position. ‘If the mission is clear and relevant to those in a community, and, ‘if you talk about what you believe...you will attract those who believe what you believe’ (Sinek, <https://www.startwithwhy.com/>); (Demirbag, 2014, p. 134).

Secondly, if we gain a deeper understanding regarding the characteristics of the school’s spiritual being, as well as how employees, parents, and adults can experience or benefit from interacting with the being of the school, this might affect how we hold meetings, how we interact with each other, what our school gatherings and festivals might include, and what kind of experiences we might provide for the students. Upon arrival at my new school, I have begun events with chant or ‘oli, and have introduced the concept of working with kina‘ole: doing the right thing, in the right way, at the right time, in the right place, for the right reason, with the right feeling, the first time. All of these experiences may lead to positive retention of families and faculty, further affecting the school’s sustainability.

Thirdly, further exploring the connection between Hawaiian cultural concepts and anthroposophical understanding of the spiritual nature of a school honors the significance of our school’s location in Hawai‘i, and pays respect to the host culture of our community. The founder of Waldorf education believed that each school should incorporate the sense of place surrounding a school and implement the curriculum accordingly. Van James, the Head of the Anthroposophical Society of Hawai‘i, translates this sentiment from Steiner’s writings in German as ‘Spirit of My Place on Earth’ (personal communication, April 21, 2015). Maori Waldorf teacher, Jade Flavell (2015), writes that Steiner encouraged the teaching of local history to foster the connection between students and their environment:

This local history would include local mountains, streams and animals in the students’ surrounds (Steiner, 1997a). According to Steiner, learning this local history arouses an awareness within the feeling faculty of the students, where they learn to form a real connection to their surroundings (Steiner 1997a) ... As a greater awareness is built around the rich symbolic ideas and motifs within Maori philosophy and principles, the Waldorf curriculum could be grounded in an understanding of the environment, in which we live, of Aotearoa-New Zealand. (pp. 48-49)

Already, all Waldorf schools in Hawai‘i offer some level of instruction in Hawaiian culture and practices. Experiencing the essence of a culture strengthens your connection to where you live; when it is an indigenous culture as in Hawai‘i, that culture also further connects you to nature and a sense of ‘oneness’ regarding humanity’s place in the universe.

Fourthly, I believe exploring the connection between Hawaiian culture, anthroposophy, and the spiritual being of our school helps to foster the evolution of our consciousness as human beings. Otto Scharmer an MIT professor and author of *Theory U and Leading From the Emerging Future*, states ‘the quality of results in any kind of socio-economic

system is a function of the awareness that people in the system are operating from...’ (Scharmer, 2015). If we are aware of what beliefs our actions come from, we might be able to conduct ‘level 4 listening’ which he calls ‘presencing’:

... a state of the social field in which the circle of attention widens and a new reality enters the horizon and comes into being. In this state, listening originates outside of the world of our preconceived notions. We feel as if we are connected to and operating from a widening surrounding sphere. As the presence of this heightened state of attention deepens, time seems to slow down, space seems to open up, and the experience of the self morphs from a single point (ego) to a heightened presence and stronger connection to the surrounding sphere (eco) (Scharmer, 2015).

And finally, stating my living-theories as a Doctor-educator improves my own effectiveness as a professional educator engaged in sharing information with those who are interested. Whitehead and Huxtable (2014) state that professionals who are engaged in Living Educational Theory are involved in a transformative method of continuing professional development:

This approach enables educators to improve their practice and offer the knowledge, expertise, and talents they develop in the process, as educational gifts to their students and the profession. This form of professional development is educational for the educator and provides the basis of an inclusive, emancipating and egalitarian approach to the development of knowledge, expertise and talents as gifts by students. (p. 1)

I don’t pretend to be single-handedly changing the world with the results of one workshop, but I do think pursuing the questions of the workshop will contribute to how I practice as an administrator, whether I can enhance the degree to which our school flourishes, the quality of relationships between people at the school, the possible effectiveness of our faculty and staff, the connection between students and their community, and the degree to which we can expand our consciousness as human beings. Pursuing the questions that come from the workshop also allow me to generate and share my living-educational-theory as I explain my educational influence in my own learning, in the learning of others, and in the learning of the social formations which influence my practice and understandings.

Values in Action

The conclusion I am currently left with after obtaining my Ed.D. – validating myself as a doctor-educator, researcher, and writer, and having the confidence to pursue my interests – is that I am now in the position to actualize the values I disclosed at the start of my dissertation:

... I seek to make my values as a practitioner within the small independent school world explicit. I believe that small neighbor island independent schools have a value and a shelf-life that is important to the communities they serve. They struggle through and make it on a daily basis for years and they offer invaluable choices to families in small towns. (Demirbag, 2014, p. 6)

As I am now working in a small school on Oahu, I believe I can bring my small town, Neighbor island, Maui-based experiences to fruitful use in a big town as well. My continued research also provides me the opportunity to further articulate my spiritual values: that human beings are spiritual beings impacted by larger beings present in the land and in the cosmos, and that recognizing these beings may cause us to flourish, achieve our personal missions, and evolve in our consciousness.

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.

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