

# School Lessons



**F**rom the time that I graduated from college, every career move has been accompanied by a return to coursework. As a beginning teacher, counselor, and assistant principal, I enrolled in classes as a way to build my capacity and effectiveness as an educator. Therefore, it wasn't entirely surprising when I enrolled in a doctoral program after taking my first principalship. I pursued a Ph.D. to learn as much as possible to make sense of the challenges and demands of the role, and to do the best job I could to serve the community and the new role I had quickly come to love.

Defending my dissertation in July 2013 was one of the high points of my life. The benefits of completing the doctoral program were immediate and continue to shape my work in my role as a principal. Immediate benefits included:

**1. Connection and Professional Community.** The isolation and loneliness of the principal role is widely acknowledged, and the opportunity to regularly connect with colleagues in my doctoral program was an immediate source of support, inspiration, and challenge. Together, we grappled with big ideas, shared our hopes and ideas for our schools, and supported one another through the various challenges we faced in the program and in our school contexts.

**2. Call to Action.** Throughout the duration of the program, coursework, assignments, and discussion served as a constant call to action, demanding that we examine our beliefs and actions, analyze our school contexts, identify issues of practice, and experiment. There was a practical side to

our coursework and discussions that prompted us to explore theory and apply it to our practice. The opportunity to think deeply about important issues, engage in such experimentation, and process results with and receive feedback from instructors and peers was highly rewarding and fruitful.

**3. Resources.** Doctoral study introduces students to articles, books, video clips, protocols, exercises, and countless other resources. In my experience, some were read and then never looked at again. Many other times, however, the resources were applicable for use in my school setting and I appreciated the introduction of practical resources to my work.

For me, the two most significant areas of influence from my degree program are related: a deepened awareness of and attention to the conditions that support learning for myself and those with whom I work, and a greater appreciation and tolerance for the "messiness" of learning and school leadership.

## Getting Messy

Writing a dissertation was often an exhausting process of questioning, grappling, drafting, testing, writing, and—more often than I appreciated—abandoning ideas and writing as new understandings emerged. It was a messy and sometimes frustrating process that yielded a piece of work of which I am proud—and I understand fully that the process made the product possible.

Now, as a principal, I carry that experience with me and it undoubtedly influences my thinking as I consider how to cultivate the conditions where learning and new understandings can be constructed. I am aware of my own discomfort and the need to quiet my urge to jump in, for example, when I watch teams of teachers struggle with meaningful issues.

Over the years, I've had many conversations with teachers about how we create the conditions that enable our students to do the heavy lifting when it comes to grappling with new ideas or solving problems. Too often, we rush in, over-facilitate, or rescue students when they struggle. I am acutely aware of the internal and external pressures that exist as a school leader to act in similar ways when staff members struggle.

My post-doctoral self has been actively working to develop my own tolerance for the discomfort and messiness of the learning process. Habits of reflection practiced throughout the doctoral program have helped me to acknowledge and attend to my own internal dialogue in the face of learning challenges with others and respond in deliberate and intentional ways.

More often than not, it seems, I resort to questioning: What are the learning opportunities here for myself and others? What is my role here? What moves can I make to support the learning?

## A Deepened Awareness

As much as I struggled through the research question development phase of my dissertation, I now feel like I am constantly drafting questions in the

course of my work.

I develop questions to guide committee work. I draft questions to approach various dilemmas and problems I face. I work with teachers to draft their annual goals in the form of action research questions. This “curiosity stance” has proved immensely helpful in addressing a myriad of challenges in my role as a principal.

Cultivating curiosity for myself and others is a priority for me, influenced by my research that speaks to the importance of “double-loop” or “transformative” learning in improving our capacity to address adaptive challenges. Such learning occurs when we not only build on what we already know, but also revise and develop new understandings of our underlying beliefs, values, and assumptions that guide our thinking and decision-making.

My doctoral experience has prompted me to more actively seek opportunities to examine and explore the variety of perspectives, attitudes, and beliefs that influence our decisions and positions at the individual, group, and school level. This has been especially helpful for me in conflict-laden situations in which a commitment to questioning and understanding has been critical in revising my initial judgment, lessening defenses (for myself and others), building insights into individuals and the school as a whole, and strengthening relationships.

Two years after my defense, I can see the ways in which my doctoral experience influences my work and continued learning. The principalship is complex and demanding, and requires us to be constantly learning in the face of new circumstances and challenges. Perhaps the greatest benefit of the doctoral study experience is the opportunity to further develop habits of inquiry, exploration, analysis, reflection, and persistence that is so necessary for effective leadership. ■

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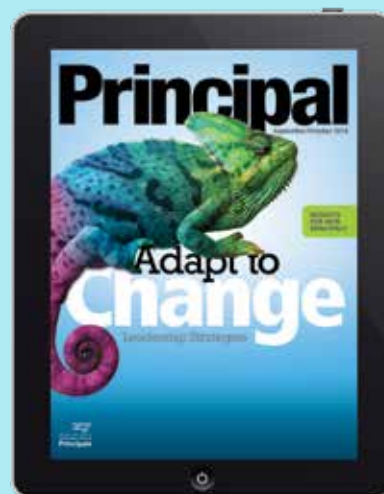
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