Emma Holmes Report: California Collaborative for Educational Excellence

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<u>Introduction</u>

As a recipient of the Emma Holmes Fellowship, I am asked to address the experience and its impact. Below, I begin by repeating my original goals as stated in my application for the fellowship. I then discuss what actually occurred over the course of the past year. Finally, the bulk of the report is devoted to a discussion of the impact of the experience on my own practice and – potentially – on the College of Education and beyond.

It is worth noting that the original application identified fall 2016 for this work; however, due to departmental need, the units were spread across the year—with one unit released in the fall and two in the spring.

<u>My Original Goals</u>

In my application for the Emma Holmes Fellowship, I wrote that working with the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE) would affect three main areas of my professional growth:

- *This work will greatly update my knowledge and understanding of California state **policy** context, including LCFF/LCAP and SBAC/school progress measures. I am the first to admit that since fall of 2013, when I gave birth to twins, my primary focus has not been education policy (for the first time in a long time!). With my boys starting preschool in the fall, I am ready and eager to get my head back into my field.*
- *Depending on how the CCEE work unfolds, the potential exists to see research (including my own) implemented up close. As a **scholar**, the application of prior research on peer review and/or strategic inquiry, and the possibility for new research in those areas, are both extremely interesting.*
- *CCEE work will give me increased legitimacy as a **classroom instructor**. Beyond merely knowing about PK-12 instructional improvement, or beyond having direct experience with site-level instructional improvement in New York, this work would involve high-level involvement in instructional improvement and school turnaround in California— specifically in the most challenged locales in California.*

Given the then-nascent state of CCEE, I specified that the site (and indeed the task) of my work was to-be-determined pending further discussion with executive director Carl Cohn. In the end, a specific task was not identified during the period of the Fellowship, but emerged following it. Accordingly, scholarship and teaching were impacted during the Fellowship period, but the "policy" goal did not unfold until fall 2017.

<u>My Experience: What Occurred AY 2016-2017</u>

At the time I received the EHF, Cohn and his two-member leadership team were still determining where (in which districts) CCEE would be working, let alone how precisely CCEE would be supporting those locations. At that time, CCEE staffing also included a director of outreach and communication, a director of research, and an administrative assistant. CCEE is a virtual organization in that staff sit all around California, including the desert, the central valley, and the bay area. This is intentional to avoid creating bureaucracy.

After receiving the EHF last spring, I met with Carl Cohn for a second time by phone on May 12. He explained that they were engaged in a robust vetting process, to establish a list of possible district support providers/tech assistance. The goal at that time was to have resources waiting in the wings for districts if and when they identified a particular problem. One possibility for my time with CCEE, as identified by Cohn, was that I work with the education leads on this vetting process. A second possibility was to conduct a district case study; this would put my strengths as a qualitative researcher to use to support CCEE in their preliminary work on district needs assessment. Cohn suggested a case study of Palo Verde in Riverside county, the first official CCEE district. However, Palo Verde is a four-hour drive and not near an airport, so for logistical reasons this was simply not feasible.

During intersession, I began devouring literature that I felt might contribute to joint work. In particular, I read scholarship on practitioner research, including as part of leadership preparation, and began considering whether a partnership around an executive Ed.D. program might be feasible, given the CCEE's mission of district improvement.

In February, I presented my CCEE contact with a sketch of a university-district-CCEE partnership with external funding, with a focus on leadership for learning. My proposal was for a nested model, with building and district administrators earning an Ed.D. while members of school teams earned the credential, MSED, or even a teacher leader certificate. Significantly, these teams would engage in practitioner action research focused on underserved students. As such, they would be addressing the precise goals of CCEE (and by extension, LCAP). Significantly, by this conversation, Anaheim Union had become a CCEE partner; given our proximity to Anaheim, and the fact that we partner with them in many ways, I suggested that perhaps they could be the site for joint work. I emphasized that my hope with the fellowship (3 units) was that it be a launching pad for a longer-term relationship/partnership. Since Anaheim had just come on board as a CCEE district, no needs/goals had yet been identified. The overall response was that the idea of a wider scale program (i.e., CSU/statewide rather than CSUF/Anaheim) could be very positive, given CCEE's statewide mission. The CCEE staffer estimated it would be six months before they would be ready to connect me to Anaheim. During this meeting, I also learned that CCEE had put their support provider vetting process on hold, opting instead to take a more home-grown approach to district change. Finally, I asked about the inclusion of Anaheim as a district, given CCEE's original conception as supporting California's districts most in need (i.e., those districts not meeting their LCAP goals). I learned that Anaheim was the only district that

took Cohn up on his offer to partner following his presentation to all Orange County superintendents. In Cohn's view, Anaheim can serve as a model of a district that is doing things right.

In the spring, I had my first meeting with Mike Matsuda, Superintendent of Anaheim Union, as well as my first meeting with CCEE's two education leads. I gained some traction during both conversations because I was honest about my underwhelmed opinion of leadership preparation *in general*, and my long-term hope of moving our programs toward tighter connection with district partners and problems of practice. A conference call with "everybody," was then set for June 1:

> <u>Anaheim Union High School District</u>
>   Mike Matsuda, Superintendent
>   Jaron Fried, Assistant Superintendent, Education Services
> <u>CCEE</u>
>   Carl Cohn, Executive Director
>   Aida Molina, Director, Education
>   Chelsea Kang, Education Lead for Anaheim (on contract with CCEE)
> <u>CSUF</u>
>   Lisa Kirtman, Dean
>   Jennifer Goldstein, Professor

In anticipation of the conference call, I prepared a memo for Lisa on executive program partnership ideas, building on the sketch I had presented to CCEE. Some of the ideas presented in the memo include:

1. Mission

   a. Close the opportunity gap among California public school children, in particular in partner districts, by inquiring into problems of practice.

   b. Promote a vision of teachers and teaching most likely to address "A," namely one that promotes teachers as professionals and teaching as complex, highly skilled work.

   c. Families and communities? (CCEE/Anaheim add wording)

2. Program design goals

   a. To prepare educational leaders at all levels of district systems in a manner responsive to those districts' needs.

   b. To prepare educational leaders in a manner congruent with best practices in adult learning theory—in an embedded, contextualized, authentic, and ongoing fashion. The boundary between "preparation" and "doing" is largely erased as practitioners' work sites become content and site for learning.

   c. To prepare a cadre of educational leaders who can lead learning organizations and respond successfully to the adaptive challenges of our time.

3. Key drivers

   a. A burning commitment to just, equitable, inclusive education

b. An inquiry stance to the problems of practice -- seeking to understand and comfort with not knowing

c. An orientation to knowledge, learning, and teaching that foregrounds the expertise of those closest to the work, while drawing on outside research and theory to inform deliberations. "Knowledge of practice" situates practitioners themselves as researchers, theorizers, and knowledge generators. Practitioner research, or inquiry, becomes the basis of both school reform and the doctoral project.[A] [B]

d. Simultaneous attention to the individual, the team, and the organization as the interwoven layers where learning occurs.[C]

4. Rationale for collaboration

a. University faculty possess research expertise, and as such can be crucial partners in shifting PK-12 cultures towards inquiry—to the extent faculty embrace the epistemologies of practitioner research. CSU also has the institutional infrastructure to be a long-term partner to districts.

b. CCEE possesses the resources and expertise to assess, together with partner districts, those districts' initial and ongoing needs, in order to shape the focus for districts' inquiry work. CCEE may also be able to be a lever for change within the University.

5. Possible delivery model elements

a. Practitioner research in place of a traditional dissertation

b. Periodic weekend classes with online elements in between, in place of current models of night classes that have diminished returns following a long day of work

c. Local nomination process (district or school) rather than self-selection

d. Organizational teams (school or district) rather than individual participants[D]

e. CCEE as initial and ongoing assessment team, to focus partner district's inquiry work

f. CSU faculty, partnered with district administrators, as outside learning team facilitators[E]

6. Anticipated challenges

a. IRB—Practitioner research pushes university research culture in many ways.[F]

b. Ed Leadership Department (EDAD)/CSU Doctoral Program Norms—Some resistance to an alternative to the traditional five chapter dissertation may be likely.

c. Capacity for skilled facilitation of district teams by both university faculty and district administrators

d. Multi-institution communication and collaboration

e. Timing given EDAD staffing shortage 2017-2018

CCEE staff emphasized the need to allow Mike to lead the conversation, a core piece of their theory of action. Accordingly, I circulated the following three guiding questions via email in front of the meeting:

1. What is Mike's vision for a potential collaboration with CSUF and CCEE around leadership development? In his view, how might such a collaboration support the ongoing learning of his team across different levels of the system?
2. Jennifer is motivated to design an EdD program that is truly practitioner-based, taking practitioner research on the ground at local sites (inquiry) as it's organizing epistemological frame and basis of the culminating doctoral project. Meanwhile, Jennifer heard Mike say, when they met, that if CSUF "designed a program around LCAP," that would be interesting to him. **Question**: Is LCAP (i.e, a district's specific LCAP goals) the logical organizing frame for inquiry program-wide, or is that Anaheim's focus (for example), to be determined separately for any subsequent participating district by that district in collaboration with CCEE?
3. Is this the right time for this endeavor?

The June 1 conference call included all seven participants listed above. During that call, Carl Cohn explained that he had begun to think about and question how we are preparing leaders across the state. During the course of the call, the conversation turned from thinking about the Ed.D. to the arguably more pressing need of administrative credentialing. Mike Matsuda expressed willingness to run with an Anaheim pilot of a practice-oriented leadership prep program. The end result of the call, based on a request from Lisa, was an agreement to create a Dropbox of CSUF leadership program documents (Ed.D. and PASC/MSED) for the Anaheim and CCEE team members to review and provide feedback.

The Emma Holmes Fellowship was a foot in the door with CCEE. Since the sunset of the EHF release period, the three-way-partnership has continued to move forward. Anaheim wants to begin a pilot fall 2018; CCEE is open to the idea of funding student tuition; and EDAD PK-12 faculty support the idea of a convening of the three partner groups, plus outside experts, in winter 2018. The goal of the convening will be to generate a shared vision for the bold leadership preparation program currently envisioned by a few key stakeholders.

<u>The Impact of the Experience</u>

In my EHF application, I wrote the following about Carl Cohn: "He deeply values social justice, deeply values equity, deeply values civil rights. He is an African American man who is pained by the extent to which an African American establishment is resisting the rising Latino population in some of our most challenged California districts (including, for example, Compton). He is rooted in 'JEIE'—in all its complexity—while being connected to the biggest players in state policy in California. *That* is a conversation of which I want to be a part, and one that can only benefit the Department of Educational Leadership, the College of Education as a whole, and any students and colleagues with whom I work."

Given the current political climate, arguably no more urgent task exists than to further our democracy. As outlined above, the year did not unfold how I originally envisioned. Nonetheless, I do believe it has been incredibly generative and has had an impact. As a professor of educational

leadership, I possess a renewed conviction to and understanding of the need for school and district leaders who create organizations where the adults think critically about their own practice. As Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) argue,

> There are critical relationships between teacher learning and student learning. When teachers learn differently, students learn differently; when teachers at all levels of experience are encouraged to ask questions, their students are more likely to find themselves in classrooms where their own questions, not rote answers, signal active and consequential engagement with ideas. In our troubled democracy, there is no more significant outcome for educational institutions, and we cannot afford to cultivate an image of teachers and teaching that promises less. (p. 85)

Stated simply, teachers who think critically are far more likely to create classrooms where students think critically.

Impact on My Practice and Renewed Engagement with the Field

Without question, the most notable outcome by summer 2017 was the extent to which I devoured literature on practitioner research and leadership preparation, and synthesized that reading into action steps for my own teaching and possible action steps for my department. In the absence of hours spent in the field with CCEE (the original goal of the fellowship), I generated ideas for collaboration and moving our programming forward. Without question, the past eight months or so has been the most intellectually/cognitively generative that I have had in years. It is impossible to know whether this engagement would have occurred without the impetus of the fellowship; the need to generate ideas for collaboration with CCEE certainly compelled me to dive into the literature.

Impact on EDD 621a (Leadership of Curriculum and Instruction). I have always focused 605/621a on strategic inquiry teams focused on cycles of formative assessment (in 605, looking at student data and moving students; in 621a, generating teacher data and moving adults). What I came to realize is that I was focused only on the *how*—how do we get better at data conversations, at working on teams, at producing results for kids. For spring 2017, I was able to step back and question the *why.* Are we preparing kids for the economy or democracy? When focused only on the how, the work of teams with very different underlying logics can look quite the same. But peeling back the layers to the why allows us to question whether the overarching logic is one of management or one of educational improvement, whether accountability is viewed as external or professional, whether teaching is being viewed as routine or complex work, and whether teachers are being asked for "fidelity" to some particular reform model or for the full force of their activism on behalf of students. These differences produce quite different interactions with student data, configurations of adult learning, and outcomes for equity. Significantly, this epistemological shift regarding the course's curriculum allowed me to really challenge our students in new ways. For example, I was more able to challenge their conceptions of "resistant teachers" (always a big part of their work trying to move teacher teams) and reframe teacher resistance—in particular under NCLB (or the shadow it still casts over educators' habits of mind)—as sometimes warranted.

In short, my renewed engagement with the literature on practitioner research allowed me to design the course to unearth more authentic, more meaningful, and admittedly more political conversations about our schools. I thought I was already doing that; I absolutely pushed my practice farther this past year. Notably, my student opinion questionnaires (SOQs) improved from a rather horrific showing in Spring 2016, to 72% As and 22% Bs in Spring 2017. While many factors contribute to SOQ scores, I believe that my "renewed engagement with the field" was contagious.

Impact on EDD 670 and EDD 603. In addition to the impact on my teaching of EDD621a, an impact can also be seen in my teaching of research design and methods courses. It makes sense that if students are learning in EDD 621a about the role of practitioner research (for themselves as leaders and for the teachers whom they lead), that they will in turn question the methodological training they are receiving in their doctoral program if it seems to stem wholly from an academic epistemological orientation. This is precisely what started happening in the spring. Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) note that, "[D]ividing lines [exist] that separate practitioner research from most forms of both qualitative and quantitative research on practice... [including] recurring tensions about method, methodology, epistemology, and ethics in practitioner inquiry" (p. 38). For the first time in my five years at CSUF, I have doctoral students who are designing action research dissertations. One, a principal, came here with a clear vision of his project—to study the impact of his approach to the observation of teachers at his site. He is in my 670 series and I am able to support him in ways I do not believe he would have been previously supported here to pursue his vision. Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) write further:

> [It] is important not to assume that the commitments of practitioners need to be reframed or redirected in order to generate dissertations. Practitioner' questions emerge from important and immediate concerns, engagements, and commitments to their professional settings, even though these questions may not be perceived by others as significant for building knowledge in the field...
>
> We see practitioner dissertations as a site of generative struggle and the mentoring process as a 'pedagogy of not-knowing'... This speaks to the profound reciprocity of the mentoring process, an organic relationship that intentionally disrupts the expert-novice distinction and, from its inception, displaces the hegemony of the university (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 107).

As a department, we are not agreed on the appropriateness of alternate approaches to the dissertation; nonetheless, I know that most of my PK-12 colleagues as well as my department chair believe in this approach, even if as a program we are not yet designed to support it.

Impact on the College of Education

When I was hired as the department chair of educational leadership in 2012, one of my stated goals for the credential/MSED program was to create a niche for CSUF around teacher leadership. "Practitioner research" is a new way of framing what is essentially the same goal, old wine in new bottles. How do we re-envision leadership programming beyond the preparation of administrators specifically to the preparation of educators more broadly—educators who are

empowered to work together to reculture their sites around learning across the organization. As Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) argue,

> We need teachers who do research about their own work, teachers who assume roles as co-constructors of knowledge and creators of curriculum. Now more than ever we need teachers who assume a teacher identity that entails becoming theorizers, activists, and school leaders. In contrast to the limiting and even atrophied images of teachers promulgated through NCLB, this image of practice encompasses expanded responsibilities to children and their families, transformed relationships to teacher colleagues and other professionals in the school setting, and deeper and altered connections to communities, community organizations, and school-university partnerships. (p. 84)

Ultimately, an opportunity exists to reshape our PK-12 educational leadership programs in a way that furthers this conception of teachers and teaching. We can do this *both* in how we prepare administrators to lead their organizations, and by unapologetically preparing teachers to lead from roles outside of administration—as members, facilitators, and change agents on teams. Measuring PASC program success by tracking how many graduates become site administrators, for example, perpetuates a limited conception of leadership—how it works and where it resides. Moving towards something like the Comprehensive Assessment of Leadership for Learning (Kelley et al., 2012) would capture how our graduates lead from across their organizations.

The challenges to inter-organizational partnerships are well-known, and the mere fact of moving forward slowly does not diminish the potential for exciting work to unfold. I believe Carl Cohn's interest in the role of educational leadership preparation is genuine and offers a significant opportunity, and the same regarding Mike Matsuda's excitement to pilot a new model of leadership preparation. Whether we implement only a partnership for the credential program, or ultimately move forward to partner around an executive Ed.D. program, the partnership itself furthers the goals of the COE. Working with external partners, tying our work more closely to the community and to practice and to JEIE, and generating outside funding—these are all central to our strategic plan. If successful, this partnership would make us a model among the CSU campuses for practice- and equity-oriented leadership preparation.

Over the past year, CCEE moved from a focus on outside support providers to growing local leadership; this shift had nothing to do with me, but we were poised to align with that revised stance. Similarly, CCEE has begun a conversation on the role of leadership preparation in their work towards district change; I cannot claim any credit for this development, but we were/are poised to be their thought partner in the conversation. In short, I do believe that my vision for leadership preparation, held since coming to CSUF in 2012, aligns with best practice as understood by CCEE leadership, putting us in a position to partner with them as that opportunity has unfolded. Obviously, any potential impact on the college is still hypothetical and tentative. However, if our leadership programs grow more tightly tied to practice, more relevant to the field, and therefore more focused on those students most in need of high-quality education as a result of any of this work, this fellowship will hopefully have been three units well spent.

References

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[A] "Practitioner as Researcher: One feature that every form of practitioner inquiry has in common is that the practitioner himself or herself simultaneously takes on the role of researcher. Duality of roles enables the classroom teacher, the student teacher, the school principal, the school district superintendent, the teacher educator, the professional development leader, the community college instructor, the university faculty member, the adult literacy program tutor, the fieldwork supervisor, and many other educational practitioners to participate in the inquiry process as researchers, working from the inside. This is quite different from most research on teaching or school leadership, where practitioners are the topics of study, the objects of someone else's inquiry, or the informants and subjects of research conducted by outsiders. In some versions of practitioner inquiry, 'researchers' also include participants who are not practitioners in the professional sense but rather are significant stakeholders in the educational process, such as parents, community members, and families…

Professional Context as Inquiry Site/Professional Practice as Focus of Study: [Another] common feature [of practitioner research] is that the professional context is taken as the site for inquiry, and problems and issues that arise from professional practice are the focus of study. This means that a variety of educational contexts at different levels of organization become research sites. Although many of these are also common as sites for research on teaching and teacher education conducted by researchers from outside, it is the combination of the practitioner as researcher with the professional context as research site that is critical. Here, questions emerge from day-to-day practice and from discrepancies between what is intended and what occurs. These are highly reflexive, immediate, and referenced to particular students or situations. But they also have to do with how practitioners theorize their work, the assumptions and decisions they make, and the interpretations they construct. The unique feature of the questions that prompt practitioners' inquiry is that they emanate from neither theory not practice alone but from critical reflection on the intersection of the two" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, pp. 41-42).

B "Although practitioner research is certainly not a monolith… the following premises are central to the larger enterprise: Practitioners are legitimate knowers and knowledge generators, not just implementers of others' knowledge; school-university relationships are (or ought to be) reciprocal and symbiotic, not unilateral or top-down; educational practice is relational, theoretical, and political as well as practical—it is not simply a technical or instrumental activity; variously configured inquiry communities have the potential to be the central contexts in which practitioners learn and the major sites for imagining and enacting change over the course of the professional career; schooling is a deeply cultural, political, and historical process that tends to reinforce existing structures of power and privilege and construct inequitable learning opportunities and life chances for students; and practitioner research—understood as [an inquiry] stance, rather than an individual project—has the potential to shape an activist agenda and thus be part of larger social movements for school reform, societal change, and social justice that directly confront and are intended to change existing structures and opportunities" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 89).

C Supovitz (2006) outlines three central aspects of organizational learning that are important to distinguish: (1) fostering individual learning in service of organizational purposes; (2) using social interactions as a means of fostering and sharing learning across individuals and groups/teams; and (3) embedding learning in the rules and routines of an organization.

D "Teacher collaboration on school-based teams is fundamental to strategic inquiry for three main reasons. First, the challenges on the table are formidable; current knowledge and practice have led to outcomes that have proven very difficult to change. The collective wisdom of school teams is needed to better understand problems with the status quo and to create new knowledge to solve them. Another way of saying this is that the challenges facing schools require adaptive rather than technical solutions, or for teams to conceptualize them as complex dilemmas to be managed rather than as problems that can be solved. Strategic inquiry assumes that teams, under certain conditions, are better and smarter at addressing challenges than any one individual can be. The complexity of managing current school dilemmas requires this collective wisdom and is worth the time and effort it takes to develop team members' skills and to cultivate the culture of a high-functioning team.

Second, the team creates a practice space within which educators can develop new inquiry behaviors and skills. They begin to forge a new culture within their team that they can later bring to their school. They practice, for instance, the habits of exposing what they do not know and learning with others in public. They do this first in the relatively protected, shared practice space of their inquiry team, which then supports and bolsters them when they spread this culture outward. Simply put, team members need the support of others with whom they have built new practices and ways of thinking to help sustain them when they become immersed in the larger school culture they're working to change.

Third, establishing from the start a team that is collectively responsible for improving outcomes for a specific shared group of students in the school engenders shared accountability" (Panero & Talbert, 2013, pp. 14-15; see also Stein & Gewirtzman, 2003).

E "By far the most critical resource for school progress on strategic inquiry is well-trained facilitators. This is because the model pushes against beliefs and norms common in the teaching profession—such as that students struggle because of their difficult personal lives or personalities and teachers can make little difference—and a skilled facilitator keeps a team on track in order to bring about shifts in beliefs that constrain progress" (Panero & Talbert, 2013).

[F] "The process of mentoring practitioner research dissertations has raised serious questions about expectations for dissertation rigor and relevance as well as issues about accountability and epistemology. These include questions about the 'significance' of practitioner studies, which is often established as a consequence of the research process rather than fully predetermined at the proposal stage; the emergent and contextual nature of practitioners' research questions and methods, which reflect their… personal, professional, and institutional commitments; the stated purpose of practitioner dissertations as the generation of local and public knowledge, which feeds back into the system as the practitioner advocates for change among multiple audiences…

The closeness of practitioners to their data sources is often pointed out by critics as a way to question the credibility and validity of their findings… To counter this kind of critique, feminists and others suggest that there is great value in 'disciplined subjectivity' or 'critical distance' or in students' 'critical subjectivity' (Herr and Anderson, 2005)" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, pp. 106-107).