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Experiences Abroad as Transformational Professional Learning for In-Service Teachers

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Imagine a teacher leaving a professional learning opportunity where the time was spent appraising the tips, tricks, and advice as not applicable to said teacher's specific classroom. This type of partially relevant professional learning does not carry the potential to transform a teacher's classroom. Little (1993) mentions a possible reason the above scenario has become a common reality for teachers by mentioning, "...that the dominant training-and-coaching model focused on expanding an individual repertoire of well-defined classroom practice is not adequate" (p. 129).

However, there is plenty of reason for hope as current developments surrounding professional learning seem to be growing in a more meaningful direction. In a more recent study, Gonzalez (2018) echoes the expected difficulties of lackluster models of professional learning in a review of new, more promising activities/experiences for today's educators. Gonzalez's review details many strategies where teachers experience relevant and productive learning with enthusiastic outcomes. Whether the recommendation be the use of peer observations, lab classrooms, voluntary piloting, and/or un-conferences, Gonzalez (2018) is essentially calling for more collaborative, reflective learning for teaching professionals – an experience that more closely mirrors Mezirow's (1992) suggestion of, "praxis as the reflective implementation of purpose" (p. 251). Recent developments within the umbrella of professional learning and the reliance upon more collaborative, reflective activities is promising, but within this nascent field, further

articulation of experiences is needed due to the critical role professional learning plays for teachers today.

Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) claimed that the improvement of professional learning for educators is “a crucial step in transforming schools and improving academic achievement” (p. ii). Within their report, the Darling-Hammond et al. (2009), issue a sweeping appraisal of 40 of the nation’s states that have adopted National Staff Development Council’s (NSDC) recommendations for professional learning. Bolstered by adding the critique of 17 professional teaching organizations across the nation, the cumulative evidence shows that professional learning initiatives nation-wide are missing the mark of effectiveness. In fact, beyond the near self-evident conclusion that better learning for teachers is a likely good thing for these teachers’ respective students, this report suggested we “as a nation have failed to leverage” more impactful professional learning for today’s teachers (p. ii).

To remedy the shortfall of effective professional learning for teachers, Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) suggest a refocusing towards “high-intensity, job-embedded, collaborative learning” initiatives and away from “content” specifics (p. iii). Existing research lends a potential remedy to the limitations of current professional learning for teachers by including specific professional learning strategies that have positive impacts, but not all areas of professional learning have been thoroughly explored. One such area is in-service teacher experiences abroad. Research concerning in-service teachers and experiences abroad is rare at best while the benefits, when examined with pre-service teachers, are commonly discussed in the literature. Benefits of experience abroad programs have been nearly exclusively focused on pre-service teaching while documenting significant transformative promise for participants (e.g. Bandura, 1997; Byram & Nichols, 2001; Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Mahon & Cushner, 2002; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2001; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011; Walters, Garii, & Walters, 2009; and Willard-Holt, 2001). What might the field of teacher education have to gain if similar impacts were explored for in-service teachers? The potential for experience abroad programs to carry meaningful, transformative impact for in-service teachers needs further investigation due to the paucity of germane research. An easy way to explicate this potential is to imagine the likely differences between legacy professional learning programs and learning experiences abroad for in-service teachers.

For example, take the teacher that had trouble deriving professional relevancy from the realistic hypothetical situation mentioned before. This same teacher returns from a high-intensity, job-embedded experience abroad where collaborative reflection with colleagues is the nexus of all activity. Engaging in a foreign context of learning for teachers provides a realistic and direct experience similar to that of students who find themselves in a new classroom complete with new rules, procedures, and expectations. Arguably, this teacher is much better positioned to implement lessons and identify similar challenges his/her students face if lessons have been learned while abroad than the teacher who has been subjected to extraneous professional learning. It is my intention to argue that high-impact professional learning can be found within the high-intensity, collaborative learning environment of study abroad experiences especially those who are teaching in rural, socially isolated environments.

Broadening the opportunities that can be and are considered viable professional learning would encourage schools of all demographics to see study abroad as a worthy pursuit. Of particular benefit, study abroad for in-service, rural teachers could be a way to add variety of learning experiences to schools that might be limited in their encounter with diverse ways of viewing and knowing the world. Study abroad for in-service teachers and their subsequent transformative experiences could then be the means to increase needed student knowledge of diverse cultures (Kritzer & Kearney, 2012). I begin with a call to include new, different types of learning as viable professional learning opportunities followed by a discussion of the types of new and different programs that research supports as highly-impactful for teachers.

Legitimizing Other Types of Professional Learning: Casting a Wide Net

Increasing the sources for potential impact does not imply a good or a bad directional influence, but it is a start at answering the question of what types of professional learning impact teacher practice. The role of the outside source can have a meaningful impact when teacher involvement and legitimation of personal experience are included in training because of the role experiential learning plays in activating of internal processes (Boud et al., 1993). However, if a professional learning program of any type begins with the notion that the teacher's own experience is bereft of legitimacy, it will certainly be more difficult for the professional learning program to impact teacher practice to any end, good or not so good. In short, a wider instructional net is cast, thus increasing the chance for a learning catch.

Scribner (1999) puts it this way, "at the district and state levels, more attention must be paid to recognizing and rewarding less traditional, but important, teacher learning activities, such as collaboration and inquiry" (p. 262). How will the field know if experience abroad is one of these less traditional opportunities that might encourage and develop teacher collaboration and a professional use of inquiry if the questions are never asked or investigated?

Of course, the width of the net will not matter much if the net is of poor quality. Increasing the width of potential professional learning sources would, in fact, increase the likelihood of quality teacher impact. Additionally, existing research reviewed in later sections suggest that a high-quality program has the potential to impact teacher practice for better learning outcomes for all.

Effective Features of Professional Learning Programs: A Quality Net

A professional learning program that allows for breadth of sources but lacks components of high-quality is also likely to be limited in impact. To allow for a broadening of resources within viable professional learning programs only goes as far as the quality of the programs offered to teachers. So, what are those components of professional learning programs that have shown to be of impact when it comes to teacher knowledge? A discussion of the core and structural features of high-impact professional learning are beneficial to this essay in two main ways. First, it is helpful to discover what types of experiences within a professional learning program carry impact upon teacher knowledge and practice. Secondly, high-quality research in the area of impactful professional learning and the methods used in these studies helps to support this essay with the best fitting research design when it comes to further research in this area.

Content Focus

Using broad survey methods, Ingvarson et al. (2005) attempt to measure the impact of professional learning components upon teacher knowledge, practice, student outcomes, and efficacy. While the last two areas of this series are of limited benefit to the essay presented here, the results concerning teacher knowledge and practice are of direct application. Attempting to determine the impact of professional learning programs on teacher knowledge and practice, Ingvarson et al (2005) use a survey of 3,250 teachers who had participated in 80 different professional learning programs. The results of the study were based upon a survey administered three months after participants' respective participation in the program. Specifically, these results indicated that the most important factor in a professional learning program that is impactful on teacher knowledge is a predictable focus on content knowledge. This was true across all programs in the study within the four-state sample. The focus on teacher content knowledge was also seen as the most important factor in the potential impact on teacher practice (p.1). The reported effect of growth of teacher content knowledge had statistically significant impacts upon both teacher knowledge and practice, yet when the two are paired, the covariance is heavily dependent upon the presence of professional community learning. This professional community, Ingvarson et al. (2005) argue, is "the extent to which the school increases opportunities for teachers to talk about the specifics of their teaching practice and student learning" (p. 14).

This means that if a professional learning program hopes to impact teacher knowledge or practice, a content-knowledge program is the best fit. It also means that if a professional learning program hopes to impact teacher knowledge and practice, a focus on content knowledge and the building of professional learning communities is essential. Yet, while the results of this study tell us that an impact can occur, it does little to describe subsequent teacher changes of practice. The limitations of this type of broad survey research are clear when comparable topics are conceived that wish to illuminate the how of change instead of measuring its presence or absence alone. With little doubt, it can be asserted that professional learning programs that lack any in-depth focus on content knowledge will also lack quality. This call for a focus on content and professional learning is echoed and extended by Garet et al. (2001), where it is claimed "that professional learning that focuses on academic subject matter (content), gives teachers opportunities for 'hands-on' work (active learning), and is integrated into the daily life of the school (coherence), is more likely to produce enhanced knowledge and skills" (p. 935, emphasis in original). Conclusively, it can be said that the focus on content should be part and parcel of any professional learning program, but the content that takes center stage must be supported, as Garet et al. (2001) showed, by additional features to ensure a greater impact.

Active Learning

A number of professional learning studies seem to agree with both the Ingvarson et al. (2005) and the Garet et al. (2001) studies specifically where authors stress an active learning model. Cobb (1994) is constructivistic and definitive in the use of active learning by asserting that "learning should be viewed as both a process of active individual construction and a process of enculturation" (p. 13). Wilson and Berne (1999) accordingly suggest that "teachers should be treated as active learners who construct their own understanding" (p. 176). Further evidential

support for active learning can be found in the following studies: Desimone (2009); Yoon et al. (2007); and perhaps most notably for my purposes here, Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009), where the claim is that “active learning opportunities allow teachers to transform their teaching and not simply layer new strategies on top of the old” (p. 2). Bryant et al. (2020) and Ishii (2017) bring currency to the topic of impactful teacher learning via active learning models. While Bryant et al. (2020) target the growth of teacher capacity in professional learning through active learning, Ishii (2017) calls for active learning strategies in support of a lifelong learning model for professional educators as a career-wide pursuit – each centers the role and importance of active learning in the process for capacity building now and learning over a career long term. This conclusion supports the idea that active learning provides the means for content knowledge growth of professional learning programs if they hope to have an impact upon teacher practice. Conclusively, a content knowledge focus of any professional learning program must not be simply interpreted as a place where teachers ‘sit and get’ information.

If teachers require more active learning opportunities for the impact of a particular learning program to maintain meaningfulness, should not that same level of opportunity be mirrored in the everyday practice of teachers when it comes to how their own students may learn in more wise, impactful ways? However, active learning of content knowledge is not the only factor in high-quality professional learning programs if impact on teacher knowledge and practice is the goal. Birman et al. (2000) discuss an important caveat to active learning by mentioning that development programs that employ “an activity is more likely to be effective in improving teachers’ knowledge and skills if it forms a coherent part of a wider set of opportunities for teacher learning and learning” (p. 29).

Coherence

The use of activity-based learning of a content-focused professional learning program may be immediately impactful on the knowledge base that a teacher can draw from, but the transfer of that knowledge to practice seems to hinge upon what Desimone et al. (2002) refer to as coherence defined as a “linking to other activities or building on teachers’ previous knowledge” (p.102). This building on previous knowledge brings the Desimone et al. (2002) study to relevance for this essay. Desimone et al. (2002) also directly links this essay with the target population of adult learners as discussed in the transformational learning theory of Mezirow (1997, 1998). The tendency for professional development studies to demonstrate a heavy, essential reliance on adults’ previous learning and/or participant andragogy creates this direct link.

Further, and to operationalize the analysis of their survey, Desimone et al. (2002) divide the measure of professional learning coherence into three parts: (a) program consistency with teacher professional learning goals, (b) state or district standards/assessment alignment, and (c) the extent of sharing with other professionals in their respective schools. Using a three-year longitudinal design of survey data, the Desimone et al. (2002) found that coherence, along with active learning, comprise “two core features” of high-quality professional learning. This significance of coherence is more easily understood as teachers making more ready use of the knowledge of their professional learning training in all areas of their professional practice. In further support of the importance of coherence, Cohen and Hill (2001) claim that the lack of

coherence in professional learning is “crippling” to most state-level reform initiatives (p. 186). Additional studies support the claim that active learning and/or coherence are pivotal in terms of high-quality professional learning programs, as they comprise the core of how teacher learning is carried out (cf. Birman et al., 2000; Cohen & Hill, 2001; 2008; Garet, Birman, et al., 1999; Garet, Porter, et al., 2001; Kennedy, 1998; Supovitz and Turner, 2000).

Perhaps the reason that the two features of active learning and coherence are referred to as core is because of the nature in which professional learning programs are implemented. It would not speak to the high-quality of a professional learning program if what the teachers are doing and learning had no bearing on their professional practice as educators. Conclusively, the literature reviewed here shows that the professional learning that has the best chance of impacting a teacher’s practice is one that incorporates active learning of content focused material in a manner that is consistent with the teacher’s role as a professional educator.

Following the suggestion of addressing both core and systemic features of professional learning programs, Desimone et al. (2002) remind researchers that each (core features and systemic design) require careful planning as programming approaches high-quality. A professional learning program with a content focus that centers active learning methods with a high degree of coherence only speaks to half of the professional learning umbrella, as these three aspects of high-quality professional learning are known as core features. These core components have more to do with the actual unfolding of any particular program and less to do with systemic design. An inspection of professional learning programs at the systemic level also gives this uncharted territory some indication of what is likely to carry meaningful, transformative impact.

Duration

Desimone et al. (2002) show that the degree of impact a professional learning program can have on a teacher’s practice is directly related to its duration. This feature of professional learning is divided by the authors into two areas: (a) “total number of contact hours” and (b) “the span of time over which the activity takes place” (p. 83). Obviously, these two parts of the feature of duration are related, as the longer an activity takes, the more contact hours between program content and the teacher. This feature of duration also is shown by Desimone et al. (2002) to have a measurable relationship to active learning and coherence, making it just as important in terms of potential impact as the core features are. Further, duration is known as a structure element of professional learning because the time in which a teacher is engaged is often dependent upon staffing schedules and the professional learning budgets of learning institutions. Logically, the longer the duration (i.e., contact hours and time period of exposure), the more a teacher can learn from a particular professional learning program.

While I am not attempting to catalogue the difference between two different types of programs, the claim of longer duration leading to more promising learning provides an intriguing question. If researchers and teachers can look at an experience abroad as a summer, semester, or even a year- long professional learning opportunity, does that mean there is much more of a promise of this type of experience impacting a teacher’s practice than, say, a Friday workshop? One way of attempting to find an answer to questions like this one is to investigate whether experiences

abroad impact teacher practice at all. Then, questions of comparison may be posed, but they are beyond the scope of this essay. Yet, the caveat to be taken from this structural component is not to be missed – teachers who have a longer period of engagement with a particular professional learning experience show much more perceived impact than those who engage in shorter-term programs.

The duration of a professional learning program is also a structural component because of its relation to the type of learning that is being sought. Shortly, duration, as mentioned by Desimone et al. (2002), is more likely to be of greater impact if the program is of the “reform type” (p. 83). The argument presented is that if professional learning programs are more traditional and shorter term, the less likely teachers are to report the respective program as having an impact on their knowledge and/or practice. In a sense, a reform type of professional learning program is more likely to offer the impactful benefits if the program provides a sufficiently long, engaging experience.

Reform Type

Professional learning programs that are shorter, more fragmented (less coherent would be the term Desimone et al. uses), and more numerous in contact sessions as opposed to numerous in contact hours with high levels of coherence are shown to have less impact upon teacher knowledge and practice. These programs are contrasted against more traditional programs in Desimone et al. (2002) such as the following: “a) within-district workshops or conferences, (b) courses for college credit, and (c) out of district workshops or conferences” (p. 85). This study further classifies reform type programs as, “(d) teacher study groups, (e) teacher collaboratives, networks, or committees, (f) mentoring, (g) internships, and (h) resource centers” which are shown to produce more features (core and structural) of high-quality programs (p. 85). It seems fairly certain that reform type programs are more impactful of teacher practice mainly because they are adequate in addressing professional learning needs of more quality duration, coherence, and active learning opportunities. No matter the core or structural components of a particular program, existing research acknowledges another variable to the type of professional learning that show promise of transformative potential – collective participation.

Collective Participation

Lastly, and related to duration and reform type of programming, is the component of collective participation. While the Desimone et al. (2002) study measured the effect of teacher technology use in professional learning, they more generally claim that, in terms of collective participation, “teachers benefit from relying on one another” when it comes to learning about new content or techniques (p. 101). In yet another seemingly obvious benefit to high-quality professional learning, teachers who engage in learning as individuals are impacted less than those within a socially collaborative arena. It can be quite powerful for teachers, especially when learning something new or difficult, to know that they are not in it alone and that they have a support system or sounding board to work out difficulties. This collaborative benefit is not unlike the experience many students may have while wrestling with new academic content proffered by their teachers or being immersed within a foreign environment. Not having the space here to discuss this matter further, I embrace the idea that teachers are and can be seen as learners in their own classroom while

serving in the role as teacher in order to draw pedagogical success from collective experience to aid in student achievement as well.

Superimposing two areas of research

Direct, durable interaction during and after a study abroad experience that is engaging and powerful shows an interesting overlap with the features of impactful professional learning for in-service teachers as previously mentioned. In short, many, if not all, of the features of impactful professional learning for in-service teachers can also be found in the discussion on the perceived benefits of a study abroad program for pre-service teachers. The connections here can be illuminated by a simple questioning strategy.

First, the two core aspects of high-quality professional learning programs are that they focus on content that is relevant to a teachers' practice where previous knowledge and experience is being built upon. How might this feature for in-service teachers be different than pre-service teachers in their direct learning of culture and cultural responsiveness while abroad? The way a pre-service teacher develops their knowledge of cultural diversity in a study abroad setting mirrors the necessity of content and coherence that are part and parcel of high-impact professional learning programs elsewhere documented. The evidence of growth is exhibited by the expanse of personal and cultural awareness in those student teachers who have studied abroad and who had specific cultural learning goals (Cushner & Brennan, 2007; Mahon & Cushner, 2002; Stachowski & Sparks, 2007).

Secondly, how is the aspect of duration in terms of contact hours and in overall time span different from a study abroad program that provides a "lengthy" experience that shows significant and long-lasting changes in a teacher's practice (Mahon and Cushner, 2002, p. 154)? This question hardly needs an answer, as the overlap between aspects of high-quality professional learning programs for in-service teachers is further shown to be present in the benefits of a study abroad program. In what might be the most promising characteristic of seeing study abroad as viable, high-impact professional learning for all teachers is the inevitable duration of such an experience. Specifically, the process of preparation for, traveling to, engaging in, and returning home promises a sufficient length of time to think and consider one's experiences. The duration of travel abroad inherently provides enough space in time to properly reflect. When a study abroad experience is paired with pre-trip, during, and post-trip reflection activities, a thread of continual, durable influence is sown between participant and their international experience which is particularly beneficial for the cultural competency of prospective school leaders (Hermond et al., 2018). One can also see further alignment between the documented benefits of experiences abroad with the characteristics of high-impact professional learning by investigating what makes particular professional learning programs impactful.

The aspects of reform-type program and collective participation frame the operation of study abroad programs. A study abroad program is obviously not a 'sit and get' session or a simple one afternoon workshop which makes it, by nature, a reform-type of professional learning. Additionally, the role of collective participation within a study abroad program is apparent in the levels of respect and the importance of relationships with students, their families, and their colleagues

(Mahan & Stachowski; 1992; Hayden & Thompson, 1998) during the experience and, often times, long after (Hermond et al., 2018). Further, as evidenced in the highly impactful in-service programs, the role of collective participation is seen as vital to the lasting effects of a professional learning experience. An illuminating question here would involve asking if highly individual or ideographic study abroad experiences yield perceptions of long-lasting impact as compared to a more collective participation experience while abroad? If it is found that collective participation produces longer perceptions of impact, then it could be said that a study abroad experience, in the area of collective participation, mirrors the benefit of professional learning programs that are considered high-impact.

Therefore, nearly all, if not every single aspect, that has been shown to be part of high-quality, impactful professional learning programs can be found within the literature on the perceived benefits of a study abroad experience. This rings especially true for pre-service teachers when that experience includes a high-degree of cultural awareness growth and collective participation. The impact of a high-quality professional learning experience can be beneficial for most pre-service teachers but the benefit for the rural educator to grow in the area of cultural competence hold special value. If study abroad experience has been shown to be of transformational potential among pre-service teachers, might this potential be found within in-service populations as well? Needed critiques of time and money should be raised. It would also be worthy to mention that if study abroad experiences documented in existing research benefit pre-service teachers, a true cost of not pursuing study abroad for in-service teachers can prove to be a missed opportunity to transform a teacher's classroom.

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