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“PD is where teachers are *learning!*” high school social studies teachers' formal and informal professional learning



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ABSTRACT

The present study used social learning theory and situated learning theory as a way to examine secondary social studies teacher participants' formal and informal professional learning. Existing literature is just beginning to attend to the potential of informal professional learning and to distinguish between formal and informal professional learning, so this exploratory study used observations of scheduled and spontaneous professional learning experiences, semi-structured interviews with 12 secondary social studies teachers, and relevant documents to consider the following research question: In what ways do high school social studies teacher participants engage in formal and informal professional learning? Results indicate that while secondary social studies teachers engage in a variety of formal and informal professional learning experiences, their informal learning experiences are the most valuable and significant for their classroom practice. While informal professional learning is not a replacement for traditional formal professional learning, lessons learned here can inform ways to improve formal professional learning and to capitalize upon teachers' existing informal professional learning experiences. This study provides insight into the ways in which social studies teachers support their growth outside of formal professional development.

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Introduction

Teacher professional development is generally considered one of the key aspects necessary for educational reform to improve student achievement in K-12 public schools (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Elmore, 2002; Guskey, 1995; Guskey & Huberman, 1995). The academic literature includes a variety of qualities recommended for effective professional development, including a focus on the improvement of teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge; the use of active learning methods; ongoing, sustained learning over time; attention to the particular context of the students, teachers, and school; and collective participation and collaboration among teacher participants (Desimone, 2009; Elmore, 2002; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Sykes, 1999). While scholars have identified numerous logical principles of effective professional development for over 20 years, the typical professional development remains “woefully inadequate” (Borko, 2004, p. 3) and removed from the characteristics identified in the literature (Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). Particularly in social studies, Grant (2003) notes that even with the wide variety of types of professional development in existence, the common thread among them is that “teachers view most professional development with disdain” (p. 200). The majority of

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professional development offerings for social studies teachers remain traditional, one-shot workshops or institutes (Adler, 1991; Grant, 2003; van Hover, 2008), and consistently “get poor reviews” (Grant, 2003, p. 200) from teachers.

Even though social studies education is central to the preparation of students for participation in civic life (Barton & Levstik, 2009; Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Hahn, 1998; Parker, 2003; Ross, 2006), the professional development of social studies teachers is rarely a funding priority (Hess & Zola, 2012; Swan & Griffin, 2013). Given a lack of funding for formal professional development for social studies teachers and an emphasis on literacy and mathematics in the national conversation around school reform (Grant, Swan, & Lee, 2012; Rock et al., 2006), social studies teachers will likely need to look to outside of the traditional professional development model to meet their professional growth needs. Particularly given the national context in which support for social studies is shrinking, an improved understanding of how to support purposeful informal and formal professional learning in educational organizations is an important contribution to the field of social studies teacher education. This study contributes to an understanding of the possible manifestations of professional learning for social studies teachers. It pushes the conversation considering ways to support meaningful social studies teacher professional learning using a broader lens of what constitutes professional learning—moving beyond the traditional (and often ineffective) formal training model to shed light on the multiple informal ways social studies teachers take control of their own learning.

Review of the literature

The term professional development can represent many different programs or experiences, from workshops—whose quality and effectiveness for teacher participants vary wildly—to critical reflection of teaching practice by an individual teacher or a group of teachers, to classroom observation of another's teaching practice, to hallway conversations among teachers (Borko, 2004; Desimone, 2009; Elmore, 2002; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Wilson & Berne, 1999). Because so many formal professional development seminars were—and are—inadequate, fragmented, and superficial (Borko, 2004; Wei et al., 2009), the term professional development has taken on a negative connotation among educators (Fullan, 2007). Easton (2008) and Fullan (2007) argued that the field should adopt the term professional learning and abandon use of the term professional development; both terms are now common in the literature.

Professional learning takes place in the school context, when teachers work with one another on common problems and respond to their students' needs (Easton, 2008; Fullan, 2007; see also Lieberman, 1995; Nieto, 2001). Easton's (2008) criteria for professional learning included mostly formal programs—those that provide meaningful time for teachers to work together, are embedded in teachers' work, are school-based to allow for ongoing support, are planned and implemented with the meaningful leadership of teachers, and are effective in changing teacher behavior, school function, student behavior, and/or student achievement (p. 757). To fulfill Easton's definition of professional learning, an activity must be quite structured; however, unstructured, serendipitous events can also produce professional learning (Richter, Kunter, Klusmann, Lüdtke, & Baumert, 2011). As teacher professional learning can be interpreted very broadly (Desimone, 2009), a distinction between formal and informal learning is useful.

Formal versus informal professional learning

Richter et al. (2011) distinguished formal professional learning as taking place in a structured environment, such as a mandated in-service event or graduate coursework, and informal professional learning as those experiences that do not follow a specified curriculum, are not restricted to a given environment, and are generally voluntary rather than mandatory. Further, they noted that informal professional learning activities are “often embedded in the classroom or school context which allows teachers to reflect on their practice and to learn from their colleagues” (2011, p. 117). Jurasaitė-Harbisson and Rex (2010) distinguished formal learning as those activities titled “professional development” and informal learning as other professional learning that occurs in the workplace, including teacher reflection and collaboration—both those that are planned and serendipitous. Mesler and Spillane (2009) examined formal learning opportunities and what they termed “on-the-job” learning opportunities, which are similar to the concept of informal professional learning defined by others.

Rather than formal and informal professional learning representing distinct types of workplace learning, Eraut (2004) placed the two on a continuum. Beginning at the informal end of the continuum, activities may include “implicit, unintended, opportunistic and unstructured learning and the absence of a teacher. In the middle come activities like mentoring, while coaching is rather more formal in most settings” (p. 250). Eraut's work was based upon research in general workplace settings and is not specific to teachers, but his description of formal and informal learning processes is applicable to education. The existing literature is beginning to attend to the importance of informal professional learning and to distinguish between formal and informal professional learning opportunities but it remains an under-researched phenomenon (Eraut, 2004). Research focusing on informal professional learning may have the potential to address the persistent shortcomings of social studies teacher professional development; the present study contributes to the conversation surrounding professional learning in social studies by attending to the ways in which one group of social studies teachers engages and finds value in various forms of professional learning.

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