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"Doing the thing works a lot better": Critical Features of Professional Development in Practice

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Empirical Research

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69670/mje.3.2.2><https://mje.williamwoods.edu/>**Amy Allen****Abstract**

Elementary classrooms rarely engage students in sustained, discussion-based social studies instruction, and many teachers report feeling underprepared to facilitate meaningful dialogue. This study asks how elementary teachers experience professional development intentionally designed to support discussion-based pedagogy and in what ways that professional development appears effective. Using intimate scholarship and qualitative methods, the author designed and facilitated a yearlong series of professional development sessions grounded in Desimone's core features of effective professional development and analyzed teacher interviews and reflections. Findings suggest that professional development with a content focus that emphasizes active learning, coherence, sustained duration, and collective participation increased teachers' confidence and willingness to implement discussion strategies in their classrooms. These findings suggest that professional development works best when teachers are required to practice, reflect, and receive ongoing support, highlighting the importance of relational and practice-centered approaches to professional learning in elementary social studies.

Keywords

Discussion-based pedagogy, elementary social studies, intimate scholarship, professional development

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Introduction

Classroom discussion is a powerful teaching tool that can broaden students' perspectives while building community (Parker & Hess, 2001), but classrooms in the United States often have a weak classroom practice of discussion (Parker, 2006; Shear et al., 2018) and discussion-based strategies are rarely implemented, especially at the elementary level (Hess, 2004; Klinzing & Rupp, 2008). A relatively small number of teachers feel equipped to facilitate discussions (Lo, 2022), even after receiving direct instruction in how to teach with discussion (Bickmore & Parker, 2015; Parker & Hess, 2001). Classroom discussion is often one-sided, following the I-R-E (initiation, response, evaluation) pattern (Applebee et al., 2003; Sherry, 2019). Since teachers come to the field with varying levels of experience with and/or commitment to using discussion-based teaching practices (Allen, 2021), professional development (PD) that addresses these topics is essential if teachers are expected to facilitate discussions in their classrooms.

Further complicating this topic are questions about when it is appropriate for elementary students to begin engaging in discussion or critical dialogue. Young students have the ability to engage in classroom discussion and critical dialogue (Hess, 2009; Paley, 1992), and, in elementary classrooms with thoughtful and well-equipped teachers, these conversations are taking place (Allen, 2018; Bickford, 2021; McGriff & Clemons, 2019; Mitra et al., 2017; Payne & Green, 2018; Serriere et al., 2017). While research concerning the utilization of discussion-based pedagogy in social studies in secondary grades exists, relatively little exists concerning the same phenomenon in elementary grades (Hess, 2004; Hughes & Journell, 2023; Lo, 2025).

Conceptual Framework

Effective PD is necessary to help teachers build the knowledge and skills they need to facilitate discussion, and research suggests a need to identify and address elements that impede or facilitate teacher learning during PD (Heineke, 2013). Despite assertions that formal professional learning can be meaningful, many teachers find forced PD low quality or a waste of time (Thacker, 2017). Desimone (2009) suggested five critical features for successful PD:

- (a) content focus: activities that are focused on subject matter content and how students learn that content; (b) active learning: opportunities for teachers to observe, receive feedback, analyze student work, or make presentations, as opposed to passively listening to lectures; (c) coherence: content, goals, and activities that are consistent with the school curriculum and goals, teacher knowledge and beliefs, the needs of students, and school, district, and state reforms and policies; (d) sustained duration: PD activities that are ongoing throughout the school year and include 20 hr or more of contact time; and (e) collective participation: groups of teachers from the same grade, subject, or school participate in PD activities together to build an interactive learning community (Desimone & Pak, 2017, pp. 4-5).

Similarly, Zwart et al. (2014) integrated principles to guide teacher learning. These principles included practicing in authentic situations, building on participants' concerns, encouraging individual reflection, enhancing transfer, and engaging at the team/school level. Indeed, throughout Korthagen's body of work (Korthagen, 2017; Korthagen & Kessels, 1999; Korthagen et al., 2006; Zwart et al., 2014), reflection is repeatedly identified as a critical component of teacher education for both preservice and inservice teachers.

How schools implement PD programs also plays a critical role in determining their effectiveness (Hu & van Veen, 2020).

This study highlights one component of a larger study investigating why some teachers are able to learn specific techniques and theories (as evidenced by their implementation or integration into their practice) (Allen, 2021). Specifically, this paper examines the effectiveness of social studies PD on the implementation of classroom discussion strategies, guided by Desimone's (2009) core conceptual framework, through an analysis of elementary teachers' responses. In this article, I explore the questions:

1. How do teachers engaged in social studies professional development designed using Desimone's (2009) core conceptual framework explain their experience?
2. Considering Desimone's five critical features of PD, in what ways does the professional development appear to be effective?

Discussion in Elementary Social Studies

In the elementary classroom, critical conversations that foster democratic citizenship are rare (Shear et al., 2018). Children can comprehend scaffolded ideas that are developmentally appropriate (Bickford, 2021; Hess, 2009; Serriere et al., 2017), but to engage in complex discussions at the middle and high school level and as future citizens, students should have the opportunity to engage in discussions from a young age (Mitra et al., 2017). Research shows some examples of elementary students engaging in discussion. Bolgatz (2007) described an activity in which students conducted an in-depth exploration of racial issues in the South, but implied that such discussions are not happening frequently enough. In peer-led literature discussion groups, Rice (2005) documented student responses to "universal themes" and found student voice to be powerful, suggesting discussion helps elementary students develop empathy for others.

In social studies lessons focused on inquiry, the use of discussion-based pedagogy is often implied (Bickford, 2021; Hauver, 2017; Ledford et al., 2019). In the March/April 2020 issue of *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, all five of the primary articles referenced including discussion in suggested lessons, either by providing guiding questions for discussion (Saylor & Schmeichel, 2020; Shatara & Sonu, 2020), calling on teachers to lead discussions (Hagan et al., 2020), or sharing examples of student voice (Hubbard et al., 2020; Kenyon & Lampe, 2020). However, it is unusual for these resources to describe explicit strategies for engaging students in discussion.

Professional Development in Social Studies

Despite recognizing that discussions can be a powerful way to teach, leading a discussion can be one of the most challenging aspects of teaching (Barton, 1995; Parker, 2001). Little research exists that provides explicit examples of discussion-based teaching strategies, especially those used by social studies teachers to discuss complex topics at the elementary level (Demoigny, 2017), and preservice teachers rarely witness successful social studies instruction during their field experiences (Hawkman et al., 2015). Developing the skills necessary to effectively facilitate dialogue takes practice, and teacher educators at every level should support teachers attempting these activities (Demoigny, 2017; Hawkman et al., 2015; Mitra et al., 2017).

Unfortunately, many teachers lack access to intensive support, and even when they do, it is not always effective in helping them teach as they think they should. In an empirical study focused on the inclusion of conflict dialogue in elementary and middle schools, though all of the teachers involved were able to implement dialogue conflict pedagogy to some degree, Bickmore and Parker (2015) found a surprisingly low number of classroom observations that included in-depth conversations about areas of concern or decision making, despite purposely seeking out classrooms where teachers wanted to infuse conflictual conversations and thought they were successful in doing so.

In social studies, Brugar and Roberts (2017) suggested content-specific PD was rare. They described a series of PD experiences focused on visual literacy in elementary social studies, working with seven upper elementary teachers to provide an embedded intervention. This study modeled Desimone's (2009) recommendation that successful PD should focus on content, be sustained, engage participants in active learning, provide coherence, and offer opportunities for collective participation. At the high school level, Thacker (2017) found that secondary social studies teachers valued professional development opportunities that were mutually engaging and helped build a sense of community. Participants achieved many of the goals associated with Desimone's (2009) PD framework in an informal setting, including the development of content knowledge, but facilitated opportunities to collaborate on "formal professional learning remained elusive" (p. 49).

Callahan and colleagues (2016) conducted a PD session for inservice history teachers on problem-based historical inquiry and historical domain knowledge. They attempted to address several known concerns associated with social studies PD: the workshop problem, incoherent curriculum, and poor delivery. The workshop problem refers to PD with a truncated time frame (i.e., a one-day workshop). Incoherent curriculum refers to the idea that the content in PD programs is often unrelated to teachers' beliefs or the school curriculum. Poor delivery refers to the delivery method. Many PD sessions feature passive learning, such as listening to lectures, rather than active learning experiences that model instructional strategies and require participants to learn (Callahan et al., 2016). These three concerns correspond directly to three of Desimone's (2009) five critical features of effective PD: sustained duration, coherence, and active learning. By providing a PD experience that disrupted these problematic norms, Callahan et al. (2016) found that, over time, participants aspired to more ambitious teaching, but the program did not provide adequate support to help them achieve those goals. Callahan et al. (2016) also noted two specific needs: providing teacher support in selecting inquiry resources and "planning classroom conversations to facilitate students' inquiry" (p. 238). They suggested that teachers "need stronger support in creating opportunities for students to substantively discuss ideas" (p. 239). They noted that they could have helped teachers develop the skills needed to craft a script of questions that progressed from lower to more sophisticated levels of thought, and that deeper preplanning and a discussion guide could have better prepared the teachers in the study to facilitate discussion. Embedding examples of a spiraled questioning script in PD materials, or leading participants through a think-aloud that demonstrates the thought process involved in creating such a list, could be particularly helpful in developing PD sessions that address the need for increased instruction in facilitating discussions (Callahan et al., 2016).

Methods

This study uses intimate scholarship to highlight a portion of a qualitative study (Miles et al., 2014) considering why some teachers are able to learn (as evidenced by implementation or integration into their

practice) specific techniques and theories (Allen, 2021). Intimate scholarship directly engages a researcher's personal experiences, knowledge, and practices as the focus of inquiry (Strom et al., 2018), often utilizing multiple methodologies but labeled as intimate first because of its subjective nature (Hamilton et al., 2016). It explicitly considers teacher educators' understandings of self, and personal experience in relationship with those we educate and our expectations of the students they educate (Hamilton et al., 2016). By engaging with personal experience, researchers who investigate teacher education from inside teacher education structures can further conversations about the construction of knowledge through the exploration of theories and analysis of practice in ways that those outside the structure would not, existing in the midst of the practice/theory divide.

From this vantage point, I planned and conducted a series of PD sessions guided by Desimone's (2009) core conceptual framework, then observed, interviewed, and analyzed teachers' responses. The full study sequence consisted of three distinct stages over one year: 1) an initial semi-structured interview where participants detailed their experiences with discussion, 2) three iterative PD cycles including observations and additional semi-structured interviews, and 3) another semi-structured interview revisiting discussion experiences.

Participants

This study took place in a large city at a private PK-12 Christian school district (about 750 students across three campuses). Participation in the inservice sessions was mandatory for all third through fifth-grade faculty, and one second grade teacher chose to participate, which provided a sufficient group (n=16) for facilitating discussion during the PD. While participation in the PD was required, participation in the study was voluntary. Three teachers (pseudonyms) participated in the study (Table 1). Participation meant that, in addition to attending the PD sessions, they completed interviews and were observed when implementing the discussion strategies introduced.

Table 1

Overview of Faculty Member Participants

Name	Education Background	Grade Level	Years Taught	Interviews Completed	Observations Completed
Faye	BS Nursing	2nd	4	8	3
Sabrina	BS Christian Ministry	3rd	6	8	3
Trista	BS Music	4th/5th	13	8	3

Self as a Participant

Intimate scholarship requires the researcher to acknowledge their own understanding of self and their relationship to the study, necessitating a situating of self as a participant (Strom et al., 2018). During the time of the study, I was the Director of Educational Development at the school where the study took place and was responsible for developing and implementing a comprehensive teacher training plan that included new teacher onboarding, annual teacher inservice, the organization of teacher mentoring relationships, and

facilitating teacher participation in external PD opportunities. I also served on the school's curriculum committee and oversaw implementation of the elementary school curriculum. As a result, I was familiar with the curriculum faculty members teach and had the opportunity to weave real-life curricular examples into the PD sessions.

These roles positioned me as a contributor to the events analyzed in the study in ways that move beyond the normal constraints and boundaries of a researcher. I was both the primary investigator and responsible for design, data collection, analysis, and reporting findings. But I also recognize that I am an element that influences and limits the outcomes and findings of this research study, particularly my ability to objectively evaluate the effectiveness of PD I designed. The findings reported here should be read with that limitation in mind. Although I consider myself a participant, when I refer to participants throughout the study, I mean only the faculty member participants, unless otherwise noted.

Data Sources and Analysis

Data included eight recorded interviews. This study focuses specifically on the follow-up interviews conducted after each PD session and on post-interview conversations related to those sessions. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed word-for-word. I conducted a series of short interviews after each PD session, individually with each participant, following a semi-structured interview protocol and lasting 7 to 15 minutes. The questions centered on participants' responses to the PD session and how they will use the strategies in classroom practice. At the conclusion of three iterative cycles of PD, I also conducted a post interview. One of the prompts included was: "During our PD sessions, you were taught to use discussion-based teaching strategies in the classroom. Describe to me how you learned to teach using discussion-based strategies."

After collecting data through semi-structured interviews, participant responses were analyzed using inductive and thematic analysis (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Shank, 2002). Interview transcripts were thoroughly read and segmented based on their relationship to the research question (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Then, using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), participant responses were connected to the critical components outlined by Desimone (2009).

Professional Development Design

Each PD session was intentionally designed as an instrument for the study using the school curriculum. Each session focused on how to effectively use a specific discussion technique in the elementary classroom. These sessions were iterative, developed after my initial interviews (part of the larger study), and modified as necessary after each session based on feedback from study participants. These sessions included all third through fifth-grade teachers at the school.

In each PD session, I presented research-based definitions and examples of the topics to be covered, followed by an introduction to the new discussion strategy (philosophical chairs, pyramid discussions, fishbowl). These strategies were chosen because they are highly prescriptive, with clear steps, and because I had used them as a classroom teacher and observed their success with younger students. After the introduction, I modeled the strategy using a text from the school's curriculum so participants could engage in a discussion using the strategy rather than just hearing about how to implement it. At the end of the session, we deconstructed the activity and discussed ways to adapt it for use in specific grade levels.

Session One: Philosophical Chairs Discussions

The first PD session took place in person in a classroom on campus. Sixteen teachers were present, including the study participants. As part of the session, teachers were asked to engage in a philosophical chairs discussion (Gonzalez, 2015) surrounding the book *The Hiding Place* (Ten Boom, 1974). This book is part of the school's fifth-grade curriculum and all teachers had been asked to read the book over the summer as part of the school's PD plan. The philosophical chair discussion centered around the question "Was it right for Corrie Ten Boom to steal ration cards for the Jews?"

Session Two: Pyramid Discussions

Due to CDC-recommended COVID-19 protocols, I was quarantined during the school's second inservice session. As a result, the second PD session took place via Zoom. Sixteen teachers were present, including the study participants. Teachers were asked to engage in a pyramid discussion (Savage & Allen, 2026) surrounding the burning of Rome using books and resources provided to teachers as part of the school's second-grade curriculum. This topic was chosen because it is material participants are asked to teach and because the passages were short enough to read during the session. The sample pyramid discussion questions modeled movement from basic fact-based questions to questions that required deeper thought (Table 2). Demonstration of this movement exemplifies Callahan et al.'s (2016) suggestion that teachers "need stronger support in creating opportunities for students to substantively discuss ideas" (p. 239), possibly by helping teachers develop the skills needed to create a sequence of questions that progress from lower to more sophisticated levels of thinking. Teachers were then asked to participate in a pyramid discussion utilizing questions about the strategies presented during the PD session (Table 3).

Table 2

Sample Student Questions for Pyramid Discussion (Gonzalez, 2015)

Student Questions
1: Who does this author suggest set the fire? Who did the other author suggest? Are there any other options?
2: How is this account of history the same or different from what we read yesterday? Look for key similarities or differences and highlight them.
3: How do we know which one is true? Can you find any evidence that makes us think one is more or less true than the other?
4: Why might the author choose not to include that some people think Nero set the fire?

Table 3*Professional Development Questions for Pyramid Discussion (Gonzalez, 2015)*

Professional Development Questions
1: Which scaffolding strategies did you notice during this sample lesson? Which scaffolding strategies have you used in your classroom? Provide examples.
2: What are some topics that you teach in your classroom where additional sources could be added to present multiple perspectives? Brainstorm ideas.
3: What difficulties do you expect to encounter when using pyramid discussions? What are some benefits?
4: In what ways do these three ideas (scaffolding, multiple perspectives, and pyramid discussions) complement each other? Do you feel equipped to engage in any or all of them?

Session Three: Fishbowl Discussions

The third PD session took place in person in a classroom on campus. Teachers were asked to engage in a fishbowl discussion (Gonzalez, 2015) centering on ideas of conformity. Each teacher was “required” to participate in the fishbowl at least once, and all teachers did participate. The initial question for this discussion, “What does it mean to conform?”, was chosen because it is part of the school’s third-grade curriculum and appeared in a pre-reading activity from a literature guide for the book *The Tale of Despereaux* (DeCamillo, 2015). During this session, I addressed ways to assess discussions (formative vs. summative, rubrics vs. diagrams). While assessment was not specifically included in the initial outline of sessions, questions about it arose during the first session, and, to honor the teachers’ input, I included this topic of teacher interest in the final PD session. During this PD session, teachers were asked to complete an entrance and exit ticket.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is the time-limited nature of the follow-up data. Teachers’ reflections and interviews were conducted during and shortly after participation in the PD cycles, allowing for insight into teachers’ immediate sense-making and early implementation of discussion-based strategies. However, this design does not allow for claims about the long-term sustainability of these practices or whether teachers continued to use, adapt, or abandon these strategies beyond the study period. Future research that includes longitudinal follow-up would strengthen understanding of how professional development experiences translate into sustained instructional change. Another limitation is the small sample size. Additionally, the study does not include a control or comparison group of teachers who did not participate in the professional development. As a result, changes in teachers’ confidence or practice cannot be attributed exclusively to the PD experience. Rather than establishing causal impact, this study aims to illuminate how teachers experienced and interpreted professional development intentionally designed around Desimone’s (2009) critical features. These findings should therefore be read as illustrative of teacher learning processes within a specific context, rather than as evidence of generalizable effects.

Results

To answer the first research question, “How do teachers engaged in social studies professional development designed using Desimone’s (2009) core conceptual framework explain their experience?”, I provide an overview of each teacher’s perceptions of the PD experiences in this section. Then, in the discussion, I answer the second question, “Considering Desimone’s five critical features of PD, in what ways does the professional development appear to be effective?” by comparing activities from the PD sessions and participant responses with the critical features outlined by Desimone (2009).

Faye

In our final interview, Faye said she has a better feeling about using discussion-based teaching strategies and now approaches them with a little more confidence. In reflection during interviews, her perspective shifted from a focus on information retention to deepening students understanding of a subject and keeping them engaged.

Because active learning and practicing in authentic situations took place as part of the PD sessions, participants were called on to engage in the discussion strategy that was being introduced. This is a characteristic that participants noted as different from PD they have been part of in the past. In one of the first interviews about the first PD session, Faye said, “We don’t often have examples. So like maybe we were given a broad idea of how to do something or some instruction about something, some theoretical model, but maybe not necessarily put into practice.” However, in referencing these specific PD sessions at the end of the year, she explained:

There was a lot of participant participation and discussion and interaction...I liked that [the PD session] gives us specifics and that we’ve practiced it. And not just someone out there telling you about something... Lots of times, it’s just a demonstration and not so much actually doing the thing. [Doing the thing] works a lot better than just someone showing you a slideshow of the things you’re supposed to do and then sending you on your way.

When asked about her perceptions of the PD learning experience, Faye said “During inservice meetings, we met you, you know, you lectured about a certain type of discussion and we practiced that discussion as a group. And then I used it in my classroom.” The requirement for study participants to implement the technique in their classroom was also a new experience for Faye. She indicated actually enacting the strategy was extremely helpful, saying,

The first time you teach anything or, you know, do anything a new way, you realize what went wrong or what could have been improved upon. So I feel like that’s a huge part of learning is doing... You don’t really know how to do, [you don’t really] learn how to do something until you actually do it.

In this case, the critical component of active learning was offered in multiple ways, and teachers recognized the value of actively engaging in their learning.

Sabrina

The ways Sabrina incorporated discussion also shifted. In the initial interview, she shared questions she previously asked her class during specific subjects but did not share examples of the ways students engage. In the post-study reflection, she specifically names the discussion-based strategies she uses, like the pyramid discussion. In our initial interview, Sabrina did not have the ability or language to articulate specific strategies, instead equating “discussion based teaching strategies” to the teacher saying “let’s talk about a topic” with no other supports in place. When asked about her perceptions of the PD learning experience, Sabrina said:

Learning [discussion-based teaching strategies] at our inservice was helpful and actually participating in them in inservice, doing the actual activity instead of just hearing the theory of the activity was extremely useful, but having to do it in my classroom was the most useful as far as learning how to do it. I mean, I did get support from you helping me format the questions maybe in a way like, which, I mean, it was still like, I came to you with like, I’m going to do it for this particular topic or this particular subject. And then you helped me to come up with some ideas on how to, to get the conversation moving. But I feel like now that we’ve done it, I can do it again. You know, I’m more likely to implement it in my classroom again, having done it just the one time and also to see which strategy might work better with which topics. There’s a lot of options now.

Sabrina calls particular attention to receiving the help she needed when she needed it and suggests that the support provided throughout this academic year was enough so that she will be able to use these techniques again in future years without additional help. Later, she elaborated on this further:

[An] inservice where you actually practice and you’re followed up with, and you’re encouraged to implement the things you’ve learned and not just encouraged, but basically like I’m going to come observe in your classroom. You’re using the technique and I’m happy to help you, you know? Tell me a subject that you think might work with what you’re talking about. And I’m happy. I mean, like, how you did that with me helped give me the confidence to start these discussion strategies. And in a way that I may not have done on my own, you know? So I think having some support was really useful and someone to help me get the ball rolling with that little bit of formatting, you know? And I feel like once you’ve done it, you can do it again.

This statement provides insight into the way Sabrina learns and internalizes new information as well as how the design of the PD sessions impacted Sabrina’s reception of new information.

Trista

After participating in all three PD sessions, Trista said, “Now I’m thinking about all the discussion strategies we’ve learned and the ways that I want to incorporate it into my classes, and I definitely feel more prepared for using discussion.” When asked about her perceptions of the PD learning experience, Trista said:

I think that you would basically tell us how you would describe the method. And you use a topic from [the school], which was really helpful cause usually we’re all pretty familiar with it and then we would actually do the strategy as a group and then we would sort of debrief about it and talk about how we could use it in our classrooms and what kind of, what things we would have to alter

or change or what might be the pitfalls or things to be ready for. We talked about assessing, which was helpful [and] I think me trying it out with my class, that was definitely learning. I think there were a couple of times that you even helped me like think through what questions might be good and that was definitely helpful. And then sort of even the debriefing and talking about like, what, how could I make this better, make this different? That was really good.

Trista also noted that the experiences in this PD were different from those in other PD sessions she had attended because of the active learning components. She said, “A lot of times we’ll do PD and not have an actual example of what we’re looking at. So I liked that you had the example of the lesson.”

Trista summarizes the key components of the PD sessions, including formal training, using a familiar curriculum, engaging in the strategy as a group, using the strategy in the classroom, and reflecting on the experience. While she mentioned that using the strategy with her class was helpful, she also notes the usefulness of some key pieces that were specific to this PD: incorporating topics teachers are required to teach and joint reflection with the presenter.

Discussion

Desimone (2009) outlined five critical features of PD, all of which were addressed in some way during the PD sessions. Below, these features are paired with examples from the study that show how each feature was included in the PD design and how participants responded.

Content Focus

A content focus incorporates activities that are focused on subject matter content and how students learn that content (Desmoine, 2009). In this PD, the subject matter content was taken directly from the school’s curriculum (e.g., *The Hiding Place*, Roman history, a literature guide). Teachers were able to see and participate in examples directly related to the curriculum they taught in their classroom, followed by a conversation debriefing the technique and discussing other ways it could be used in the classroom. Engaging in experiences that highlight curriculum used by teachers is important for multiple reasons. Korthagen and colleagues (2006) suggested what teachers experience as learners of teaching shapes their perceptions of practice. Learning about learning and learning about teaching need to be continually made explicit.

Participating in learning experiences directly focused on the material they teach while learning about teaching explicitly is a crucial part in preparing teachers to implement new materials or new strategies. This intentional decision was noted and appreciated by faculty member participants.

Active Learning

According to Korthagen (2010), there is a difference between “the nature of the knowledge existing in the minds of teachers that really helps them to act effectively, and the knowledge as it is taught in teacher education” (p. 99): a noticeable divide between theory and practice. Desimone (2009) highlighted active learning (opportunities for teachers to observe, receive feedback, analyze student work, or make presentations, as opposed to passively listening to lectures) as a critical component of effective PD, while Callahan and colleagues (2016) critiqued PD sessions that feature passive learning activities like listening

to lectures.

Teachers noticed and appreciated the active learning experiences present in this study. In interviews, teachers frequently made comments like “I liked that you had the example of the lesson,” as Trista said, or “I liked... that we’ve practiced it,” as Faye said. The opportunity to engage in active learning during teacher education opportunities stands in stark contrast to traditional forms of teacher education. Participants indicated that traditional PD sessions rely almost exclusively on lectures and PowerPoint slides and rarely give teachers the opportunity to practice the learning strategies they are later expected to implement proficiently. This study adds to the body of work that challenges lecture as an appropriate form of teaching about teaching.

Coherence

Desimone’s (2009) third critical feature, coherence, is content, goals, and activities that are consistent with the school curriculum and goals, teacher knowledge and beliefs, the needs of students, and school, district, and state reforms and policies. The idea of coherence is similar to what Zwart et al. (2014) called building on participants’ needs and concerns.

Though my role as both designer/implementer of the PD and researcher is a limitation, it is also a positive affordance of intimate scholarship (Strom et al., 2018). Because of my firsthand experience with the curriculum and teacher expectations, the school curriculum could be woven throughout the PD sessions. Each session was constructed iteratively, building on what was learned in the last while allowing space for teachers’ beliefs and attitudes to shape future sessions. For example, in my initial outline, I had not planned to cover what it looks like to assess discussions. Because that question was asked specifically in the first session, I added it to the PD sessions, building on participants’ needs, as advised by Zwart et al. (2014). In our final interview, Trista noted this specifically. To further build coherence, many of the assessment examples I used in the third session came directly from teachers at the school after I asked for feedback on how they conduct assessments.

Sustained Duration

Sustained duration describes PD activities that are ongoing throughout the school year and include 20 hours or more of contact time (Desimone, 2009). Similar to sustained duration, Callahan et al. (2016) cite the workshop problem (e.g., a one-day workshop or several-day institute with little to no follow-up) as one of the known concerns associated with social studies PD. The PD sessions in this study took place over the course of an entire school year as they were presented at each quarterly inservice with each session lasting 50 minutes. I then provided additional support to teachers throughout the year. As a result, each faculty member participant averaged at least 8-10 hours of contact time, a majority of which was one-on-one. Two of the study participants, Trista and Sabrina, regularly reached out to me for support in ways that were directly connected to the study. From my observations, additional access to me as a de facto instructional coach appeared to be an essential part of the reason that Sabrina wanted to participate in the study. Trista also repeatedly reached out to me to request help planning, discuss what implementing a new strategy might look like, and would even text me or ask me to join her at lunch to further discuss. She used each technique multiple times beyond my initial observation of it and almost always discussed it with me in detail afterwards. In our final interview, this access was referenced as a key part of the learning experience. The

one-on-one support that was consistently available throughout the school year was mentioned by the participants as useful when thinking about the ways they engaged in learning during the study. Sabrina said “I did get support from you helping me format the questions... And then you helped me to come up with some ideas on how to, to get the conversation moving.” While ideally there would have been a greater amount of contact time, both collectively (starting the program in August rather than October) and individually (an increased number of observations and conversations), sustained contact throughout the school year does address this critical component.

In conversation with existing literature about PD in and outside the field of social studies (Callahan et al., 2016; Desimone, 2009; Korthagen, 2017), this observation demonstrates a need for teachers to have access to the speakers who present PD workshops in a meaningful way, and this access could begin to address some of the known concerns surrounding a lack of sustained duration.

Collective Participation

The final critical feature outlined by Desimone (2009) is collective participation, meaning PD where groups of teachers from the same grade, subject, or school participate in PD activities together to build an interactive learning community. Zwart et al. (2014) also refer to this idea when they share an approach to teacher learning that promotes engagement at the team and school level. While only three teachers fully participated in the study, all third-through-fifth grade teachers at the school participated in the three PD sessions collectively. These 16 teachers include all upper elementary teachers in the district (and one second grade teacher). During each session, after practicing the strategy, teachers would engage in conversation deconstructing the experience. Trista explains in more detail:

We would sort of debrief about it and talk about how we could use it in our classrooms and what kind of, what things we would have to alter or change or what might be the pitfalls or things to be ready for.

Working together to construct knowledge that is relevant to all the teachers who are part of this group meets the criteria of the fifth critical component, and multiple participants referenced this as a helpful part of the PD experience.

Beyond these collective active learning experiences, there is a need to provide time and space for reflection is critical to keep in mind when developing PD for inservice teachers. Although I am including discussion of reflection here, under collective participation, it is not explicitly mentioned by Desimone (2009) in her definition of these terms. However, I would advocate it is equally important as the five critical components outlined by Desimone (2009) and warrants its own heading. When we consider what teachers bring to the table as professionals with personal experience, the opportunity to reflect on learning experiences helps them make sense of information that exists in their mind as alleged and (optimally) cement new techniques and theories as factual. However, as it currently stands, time for reflection is rarely built into teacher training (Callahan et al., 2016; Desimone, 2009; Korthagen, 2017).

Conclusion

Teachers often share that PD “feels like a waste of precious time, time that could be spent developing skills that would make a real difference in their specific practice” (Gonzalez, 2016, para 2). Teachers like Faye

suggest they don't often have examples. This study widens the academic dialogue about social studies PD to include the experiences of elementary teachers in a private school setting and offers a model of PD that emphasizes relationships and reflection. As a result of engaging in this PD, teachers reported a positive experience and implemented the strategies taught during the session. How schools choose to implement PD programs plays a critical role in shaping their effectiveness (Hu & van Veen, 2020). While the school highlighted within this study provided a particular context because of the existing relationship I had within the school and the unique backgrounds of the teachers who chose to participate, this example highlights Desimone's (2009) five critical features of PD and the role of relationship and reflection as critical aspects for educators and administrators to keep in mind when developing PD programs.

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