

Experienced Outcomes of a Self-Directed Professional Development Program

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Introduction

Conventional professional development activities, such as inservice training and attending conferences or workshops, are often turned to by instructional leaders for fostering the professional growth of educators they supervise. Top-down planned, one-size-fits-all approaches to professional development, which often seek to provide standardized instruction so as to maintain consistency in teaching expectations (Marczely, 1996), generally do not result in the professional growth that the participating educators seek (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992; Wilson & Berne, 1999). Conventional forms of professional development commonly lack value for participants, are often considered to be inadequate, and “rarely lead to significant change” (Freidus et al. 2009, p. 184; Borko 2004; Darling-Hammond et al.; Glickman et al., 2010).

According to Mushayikwa and Lubben (2009), “Self-direction has been identified as a potential key to the success of professional development of teachers” (p. 375). Brockett (2009) noted that self-directed learning could have “crucial implications” (p. 47) for continuing professional education. Using self-directed learning “may reduce the mismatch between continuing professional development (cpd) inputs (teacher learning activities) and the outputs (teacher cognition and classroom practice)” (Mushayikwa & Lubben 2009, p. 376).

This study addresses the need for research pertain

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Note: This manuscript was accepted for publication by the prior editorial team and review board.

ing to the use of self-directed learning in educators’ professional development (Merriam et al., 2007; Wagner, 2011; Zepeda et al., 2014). In satisfying this need, this study examined the experiences of educators within the Seminaries and Institutes of Religion (S&I) program with a form of self-directed professional development. The research question that guided the efforts to accomplish the purpose of the present study was, “What perceived impacts has S&I educators’ engagement in doing certification projects had on their professional growth?”

Context of the Study

S&I is an educational entity within the Church Educational System operated by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For the 2012-2013 school year, 397,036 students worldwide, generally ages 14-18, enrolled in seminary, which is a four-year religious education program consisting of daily scripture-based instruction during a school year (Seminaries and Institutes of Religion, 2014). For the same year, 359,828 college-age students enrolled in institute, which is a program of “weekday religious instruction for young single adults and married postsecondary students (generally ages 18 to 30)” (Seminaries and Institutes of Religion, 2014, p. 1). Students were serviced by 45,102 volunteer educators and 2,013 full-time administrators and teachers (defined as “educators” in this study) (Seminaries and Institutes of Religion, 2014).

The experiences of full-time administrators and educators, as well as students, in S&I are similar in many ways to those of educators in traditional public and private settings. Full-time administrators and educators each have a minimum of a bachelor’s degree received from an accredited institution in various fields of study. Many educators also possess a master’s degree, and several have earned a doctorate degree as well. As in traditional secondary and post-secondary education settings, students must complete assigned readings outside of class and must pass learning assessments for

course credit. By way of learning, students engage in textual analysis, the exploration of moral and spiritual principles, and discussion-based learning methods. Professional S&I educators participate in weekly inservice trainings and annual area (the equivalent of a district) level inservice trainings with the intent of furthering their professional growth and refinement.

As an outgrowth of S&I's organizational value of continually seeking to improve (Hawks, 2013), in 2012, S&I implemented a professional development program for full-time seminary and institute educators. This program, referred to as the Certification Program, incorporates principles of self-directed learning. The Certification Program is comprised of four credentials that S&I educators can earn: Certifications 1 and 2, a master's degree, and a doctorate degree. Certifications 1 and 2 are earned by completing 12 certification projects per credential. These projects can consist of self-designed projects (required minimum of four per credential), guided projects (designed by S&I central office personnel and detailing learning activities to complete for credit; these are optional projects that educators can complete if desired), and S&I-sponsored certification classes. Each of these project types are intended to help educators develop in three professional areas of practice: teaching and learning, content mastery, and administrative and leadership skills. A minimum of three projects must be done in each of the three areas of practice, and three additional elective projects may be done in any of the categories. In addition to being aligned with the core work of S&I, the certification projects that educators select are to be related to their work responsibilities and other professional needs that arise from work-related situations.

Involvement in this program is voluntary. Educators have primary responsibility for planning, working on, and evaluating the projects they engage in. Prior to beginning work on a project it must be approved by the educator's immediate supervisor. Educators are to spend approximately 30 hours working on each project, and nearly all of the time must be spent outside of educators' regular work hours. The final product of a project is either a 15–20 page written paper (8–10 page if completed as part of a certification class) that meets designated requirements, or a portfolio of work products (e.g., a journal, tests, interviews, multimedia) that demonstrates work on the project. Final products are reviewed by two peers, and their feedback is returned to the submitting educator. The project is then submitted for approval by the educator's immediate supervisor.

Completion of a certification credential results in an increase in pay when the requirement for years of work experience for advancement is also met. A potential by-product of completing this program is that educators have identified additional resources and developed skills to continue self-directed professional growth pursuits.

Review of Relevant Literature

Being responsible to teach more subjects to a student body with diverse learning needs and styles, assuming more responsibilities with the management of schools, and needing to utilize continually evolving technologies are factors that contribute to educators' need for ongoing professional development (Beavers, 2009; Lohman & Woolf, 2001). Professional development is a means for acquiring or improving practice-related knowledge, skills, or beliefs, but these outcomes are considered means to the greater end of improving student learning and achievement (Desimone 2011; Learning Forward 2012; Mizell, 2010; Roux, 2013). According to Wei, Darling-Hammond, and Adamson (2010), "Research shows that teacher quality is the single most important influence" (p. 8) on student achievement, and that teachers' effectiveness "can be fostered through high-quality professional development" (p. 8).

What are the characteristics of high-quality professional development—that which results in improvements in educators' practice and student learning? According to research, effective professional development

- Is intensive, ongoing, and sustained over time (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Desimone 2011; Garet et al., 2001).
- Is job-embedded—connected to educators' practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Garet et al., 2001).
- Focuses on improving educators' content knowledge and understanding of how to help students learn it (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Desimone, 2011; Garet et al., 2001).
- Involves collaboration among educators in their learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Desimone, 2011).
- Involves active, hands-on learning (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Desimone, 2011; Garet et al. 2001).

What is known about effective professional development is not always applied to practice. For example,

conventional standardized forms of professional development that are not ongoing or sustained over time and are not job-embedded might be implemented. Though these offerings can still result in meaningful outcomes for educators (Boyle et al., 2005; Guskey, 2009), the participants generally do not find that such forms of professional development are relevant to their needs for growth and their learning goals (George & Tracy, 1993; Lohman, 2003). These needs can be influenced by educators' unique contexts, circumstances, and challenges that they experience in their individual schools and classrooms (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992; Marczely, 1996; Mizell, 2010). After studying principal professional development practices, Zepeda et al. (2014) concluded that "professional development needs to be more fully aligned to the needs of the participants who engage in professional learning" (p. 312). Yet, as Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2010) observed, "The need to individualize teacher learning, indicated by the literature on adult learning, stands in sharp contrast to the actual treatment of teachers" (p. 59).

As adult learners, educators engage in learning to improve their abilities to deal with immediate tasks (Knowles et al., 2005). They "learn what they think they ought to learn depending on their professional needs" (Terehoff, 2002, p. 74). Research has also illustrated that effective professional development involves the educators themselves in planning the learning goals, content, and activities (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Duron, 1994; Glickman et al., 2010; Jacka, 1997; Jailall, 1998; Merriam & Leahy, 2005). Doing so allows educators to tailor their professional development efforts to their individual needs (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004). Such involvement shows respect for educators' professional expertise and judgment and can increase their motivation to learn, their ownership of the learning activities, and the meaningfulness of the activities (Acevedo, 2013; Castle & Aichele, 1994; Corabi, 1995; Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Duron, 1994; Gibbs, 2002; Lawler, 2003; Mahmood, 2003; Mushayikwa & Lubben, 2009).

One reason that conventional professional development practices may fail in their effectiveness is that they often give little or no acknowledgment of educators' learning characteristics as adult learners and neglect principles of adult learning in their design (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Steinke, 2012). Within the field of adult learning theory, "a prime characteristic of adulthood is the need and capacity to be self-directing" (Knowles, 1975, p. 130). Self-directed professional development is a way to align educators' professional development—an adult learning experience (Zepeda et

al., 2014)—with what is theoretically and empirically understood about adult learning.

Principles of self-directed learning can be applied to professional development by giving educators choice in activities they will engage in and by encouraging the use of self-designed learning projects. Self-directed professional development allows for individualized professional development that gives educators responsibility, choice, and involvement in the planning of their learning (Steinke, 2012). Educators can choose activities that are sustained and of sufficient duration to allow for understanding and application. The learning can be job-embedded, focused on improving educators' content knowledge, can involve collaboration with others, and can allow educators to be actively involved in the learning activities.

Multiple studies have found benefits in terms of meaningful learning and professional growth, as well as benefits for students in terms of improved learning, as a result of educators' self-directed professional development (Acevedo, 2013; Corabi, 1995; Gibbs, 2002; Husby, 2005; Jailall, 1998; Morgan et al., 2005; Mushayikwa & Lubben, 2009). However, professional development programs centered in principles and practices of self-directed learning have not been widely implemented in educational institutions (Steinke, 2012). This study sought to gain further insight into what it is like to experience this type of professional development program and to explore its perceived effectiveness in the eyes of those who experience it.

Methodology

Seeking an understanding of the perceived influence of doing certification projects on S&I educators' professional growth was part of a broader effort to gain an understanding of S&I educators' experiences with self-directed learning in doing certification projects. Addressing these questions required the use of qualitative methodology. A qualitative approach to research is appropriate when seeking an understanding of individuals' experiences or the meanings they make of their experiences (Patton, 2002).

Phenomenology, or the study of phenomena as they appear in one's consciousness (Moustakas, 1994), was the specific qualitative methodology selected for this study. According to Brockett (2009), "In terms of self-directed learning research, phenomenology could prove valuable in promoting an understanding of how learners experience self-directed learning in their own lifeworlds" (p. 43).

Sample

Phenomenological research “describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 77). Therefore, a purposeful sampling strategy is employed to gather data from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of interest.

To allow for a greater potential breadth in the prospective study participants’ experiences, the foundational sampling criteria for this study were the completion of certification projects in at least two of the established categories (e.g., teaching and learning, content mastery, and administrative and leadership skills), and the completion of at least two different types of projects (e.g., self-designed, guided, classes). A list of potential candidates who met these criteria was generated and organized by S&I area (the equivalent of districts in public education). Study participants from several S&I areas would be selected to allow for potential differences in area supervisor influence. The prospective participants’ geographic location was then considered, giving preference to being located in northern Utah to enable consistency in data collection. Finally, years of professional experience for each prospective study participant was identified to facilitate the selection of educators at different stages of their careers to allow for any potential influence of age and experience to be reflected in the data.

Seven Caucasian-American male S&I educators were selected who met the program-experience and geographic-location sampling criteria. These study participants had completed 4–7 projects each (a total of 44 combined), the majority of which were self-designed projects, and each participant was in the process of working on more. Some of these projects included a study of the use of effective questions in teaching, utilizing technology and multimedia in the classroom, effective classroom observations and feedback, action research exploring establishing rapport with students, a collaborative evaluation of video resources for use in teaching, completion of S&I-sponsored classes on teaching skills and biblical content, a study of personal organization and accountability in the workplace, and a study of leadership principles and skills.

Participants ranged from 4–30 years of professional experience and represented six different S&I areas (two participants were from the same area). Five participants were assigned at seminaries (instructing high school-

age students) and two were assigned at institutes (instructing college-age students). Of those participants assigned at seminaries, one was a principal of a seminary and another was an assistant principal. In addition to their administrative responsibilities, both still taught at least one seminary class. Each participant had earned a bachelor’s and a master’s degree.

Data Collection

Obtaining an understanding of what exists in an individual’s consciousness, and how it exists, requires an understanding of his or her lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Such understanding can be obtained through interviewing, which is recognized as the typical and preferred method for data collection in phenomenological research (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Each of the selected participants initially participated in a one-on-one, semi-structured interview, which allowed for an in-depth exploration of their experiences with self-directed learning in doing certification projects. Each participant was interviewed a second time to allow them to clarify and expound on anything from the first interview (having been sent the transcript prior to the second interview) and to enable broader and deeper probing into their experiences. A research journal served as an additional data source.

Data Analysis

Participants were sent each interview transcript for their review for accuracy and to allow them to clarify or expound on anything they deemed necessary. After transcripts were returned, they were analyzed in accordance with phenomenological methods. Each transcript was first reviewed in its entirety to obtain a general impression of each participant’s experiences, and additional notes were made in the research journal. The transcripts were then carefully read and significant statements that were relevant to the experience of self-directed learning in doing certification projects were identified and coded. These coded statements were grouped by similarity and further analyzed to construct meaning units, or non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements (Moustakas, 1994). The meaning units were then grouped, or clustered, into common categories referred to as themes (Moustakas, 1994). In the identification of codes and interpretation of participants’ experience, the research journal was consulted. The transcripts from both interviews, combined with the research journal, enabled the triangulation of the data.

An external auditor examined the transcripts, research journal, meaning units, themes, and findings to assess for researcher bias, appropriateness of interpretations, and credibility. The auditor attested that qualitative methods were properly followed, and the results and findings of this study were grounded in the data.

Findings

The following nine themes emerged from participants' descriptions of their experiences with self-directed learning in doing certification projects: the influence of personal characteristics; motivation; personal interest and applicability; the influence of others; the influence of program requirements and expectations; lack of understanding of the requirements, expectations, and financial implications of doing certification projects; time; emotions experienced in doing certification projects; and perceived influence on learning and growth and use in practice. As illustrated in these themes, several internal and external factors contributed to participants' experiences, each factor containing diverse findings and implications regarding the use of self-directed learning in professional development.

As noted previously, the purpose of this study was to explore the perceived impacts of S&I educators' engagement in certification projects, thereby examining the merits of the use of self-directed learning in educators' professional development. Therefore, findings pertaining to the theme of central relevance for the purpose of this study—the influence of certification projects on participants' learning and growth and use in practice—are presented below. Direct quotations from participants are included to contribute to the richness of the description of their experiences.

An Opportunity to Have Additional Professional Development Needs Met

Every participant perceived the purpose of certification projects to be the professional growth of S&I educators. One seminary teacher (10–13 years of experience) described certification projects as “12 or 24 opportunities to grow and to expand and to be better.” Participants felt that they had experienced some professional improvement as a result of participating in weekly and summer in-service trainings that were part of their regular work responsibilities, but most participants expressed that not all of their professional learning needs were met by regular in-services. Three participants said that certification projects allowed them to meet their learning needs “beyond what in-service is

doing” (institute teacher, 14–17 years of experience), thereby filling a gap between what is accomplished through regular in-services and educators' ultimate professional development potential. With certification projects, participants felt they could study a greater breadth of topics in greater depth than what could be done in in-service trainings.

Increased Understanding and Changes in Practice

Each participant reported increased understanding of subjects they studied and also described changes in their professional practice as a result of certification projects they had done. These changes came from using content knowledge they had gained and administrative and teaching skills and resources they had developed. Some changes included adjustments in the use of technology in the classroom, increased sympathy for students who have various challenges, and improved use of questioning and memorization techniques. The extent to which certification projects contributed to changes in teaching practice was reflected in the following comment from one participant (seminary teacher, 10–13 years of experience):

In retrospect, I look at the body of work that's been there, and almost on a daily basis it comes out somewhere in the lesson, somewhere in the way I speak, somewhere in the way that I ask questions, somewhere in the way that I use technology. So it's a positive thing.... I think they're all specifically being used.

Creating a Resource to Reference or Use

Six participants discussed creating a product they could reference or use in their practice. These products included spreadsheets of multimedia resources that could be referenced to help participants save time in their lesson preparation; documents consisting of compilations of quotes or other learning resources pertaining to subject matter to refer to, use, and add to; and learning resources for students to use in the classroom. Three participants described reviewing some of the resources they had created to identify additional ideas they could use in the classroom or to prompt additional study. One seminary teacher (10–13 years of experience) felt that “a body of 12 of those [resources] could have some good shelf value for years and years.”

Meaningful Growth and Improvement

Five participants perceived that they experienced meaningful growth as a result of doing certification projects. Some of these participants described how doing certification projects kept them from “stagnating.” One institute teacher (14–17 years of experience) believed this was the case “because you’re still stirring up the water—you’re adding new, more water. You’re becoming better, and so you don’t stagnate.”

A seminary teacher (4–6 years of experience) described experiencing the following upon completion of a certification project: “Wow, this feels good. It feels enlightening. It feels empowering....I feel better. I feel like I’m out of neutrality and I’m increasing. I’m improving instead of just coasting.” He felt he was improving “in just being a well-rounded teacher and more knowledgeable human being, which is a plus.” He hoped that as a result of doing certification projects he had “taken to heart” that he “can always figure out something to work on” in his professional practice.

Another institute teacher (14–17 years of experience) appreciated that some of his learning “bleeds over into [his] personal life.” Thus, in addition to his learning helping him become “a better teacher,” he hoped it was helping him “be a better person” and “a better father.” He felt that having done certification projects will strengthen his future self-directed professional learning efforts.

One seminary teacher (10–13 years of experience) felt that the certification projects he had done—“some more than others”—had “benefited [his] career,” and that ultimately he was “better in the classroom” as a result of doing certification projects. He felt that certification projects help an educator to be what he otherwise wouldn’t be in the job for himself, for his students, and for S&I. And I think that that’s what [S&I administrators are] wanting. And, you know, with the seven or eight projects I’ve done, that’s how I feel. I feel like that’s happening. Another seminary teacher (10–13 years of experience) felt that “if your heart’s in the right place, you’re going to benefit a lot” from certification projects, “no matter what it is.” He described the “right place” as being “willing to learn and grow and improve.”

Improvements, But Not Large

Two participants—the seminary principal and the assistant principal, who had both been employed for 25–30 years—did not perceive that they experienced large improvements professionally as a result of doing certification projects. The seminary principal expressed the following about doing certification projects:

When it gets right down to being a better teacher in the classroom, I don’t think...at least, that’s for me. Maybe I’ve just done the wrong projects, but for me, it hasn’t.... It’s given me some new insights, it’s made me think about some things, but I don’t know whether it’s really made me a better teacher....I think there’s small increments of improvement in all of the things that you do if you’re doing it with the right mentality. Large things—I don’t see any mind-blowing professional improvement things. I wish there were some things like that.

Despite not perceiving any “mind-blowing” improvements, the seminary principal said that there had “been some good things that have come out of” doing certification projects. He described having obtained improved understanding of how to teach certain subject matter, receiving confirmation of his understanding of leadership principles, and implementing certain practices that he would “keep for the rest of [his] career that will have an effect on [his] career.” He anticipated that his remaining certification projects would “be good” for his professional growth, and overall, he was “glad” he had worked on certification projects.

The assistant principal said he experienced a “process of learning and growing” by doing certification projects. He felt that doing certification projects had also helped him stretch himself, that he had experienced some “self-improvement,” and that he had developed some “self-discipline.” However, regarding the improvement he had experienced, he said,

I do not know that the projects have made me a better teacher or given me skills that I needed. I think that projects have helped maybe make some tweaks.... I’ve grown because of the effort—but, I don’t think the projects have made me better. If I hadn’t done any projects, I think I’d hopefully still be in a good place, still striving to hang on and be effective and learn.... But overall, I don’t think the [certification credential] is a monumental thing that says, “Well, look what you’ve become because of these projects.”

Although he did not perceive large improvements in general, he did report that a certification project involving a study of new teaching methods was “making [him] a better teacher” and “really benefiting” him in the classroom.

Impact on Students

Five participants described examples of how what they had learned from different certification projects affected their students’ learning experiences in positive

ways. Some participants felt that their students were able to improve their understanding of different topics related to the subject matter because of what the participants had gained in terms of enhanced content knowledge or teaching skills. One seminary teacher (10–13 years of experience) said that every certification project he had done had benefited his students' lives.

One certification project completed by a seminary teacher (4–6 years of experience) illustrated how his students were affected by his learning. This participant chose to survey his students to gain an understanding of their perceptions about certain teaching methods. Regarding the influence of the understanding he gained of the need to change his practice to align with students' reported preferences he said, "It completely affected very, very quickly how I taught. And I could see the results quickly." He surveyed his students at the end of the semester regarding their classroom experiences, and students reported having more excitement to attend class and more enjoyable learning experiences as a result of adjustments he made in his teaching. The results of this survey led him to know that this certification project "actually benefited [his] employment and [him] personally." He said that this experience "made [him] a believer in the certification [projects]."

Discussion

S&I's Certification Program provides a model that could be adapted and expanded to align with professional development in traditional educational settings, including continuing professional development programs. So, what from the experience of S&I educators with certification projects can be learned and applied to the concept of self-directed professional development for educators in general?

Certification projects are intended to be professional growth and improvement opportunities for S&I educators, and every participant in this study experienced these outcomes to some extent. Participants also experienced some of the intended outcomes of professional development described in related literature, which include enhancing or deepening educators' content and other job-related knowledge and transforming or developing new instructional practices, methods, and skills (Borko, 2004; Ferrara, 2009; Lohman & Woolf, 2001; Roberts, 2009; Tough, 1971). Every participant reported that his understanding of teaching methods, content, or administrative topics changed or increased, to varying degrees, as a result of engaging in self-directed learning in doing certification projects. These findings

pertaining to participants' professional growth as a result of doing certification projects contribute to the body of research that has found benefits for educators in terms of meaningful learning, changes in instructional practice, and professional growth as a result of engaging in professional development that incorporates principles and practices of self-directed learning (Acevedo, 2013; Corabi, 1995; Cummings, 2011; Freidus et al., 2009; Gibbs, 2002; Husby, 2005; Jallal, 1998; Morgan et al., 2005).

The ultimate end of professional development activities is professional growth that results in improved learning experiences and outcomes for students (Borko, 2004; Desimone, 2011; Glickman et al., 2010; Mizell, 2010). Assessing the effects of participants' learning from their certification projects on their students' learning experiences and outcomes went beyond the purposes of this study. However, multiple participants described how their learning outcomes in the form of improved content knowledge or teaching skills had, what they perceived to be, a favorable influence on their students' learning. As a result of these participants' learning and growth, they perceived that their students were able to better understand or master certain subject matter, were more engaged in their learning, or were more likely to apply their learning in their personal lives.

It could be anticipated that engaging in certification projects would result in professional growth because of the characteristics of effective professional development that are present in the structure of certification projects. Certification projects are intended to be job-embedded and therefore designed to respond to educators' needs and interests. A minimum of three certification projects must focus on improving educators' content knowledge, though specific emphasis is not always given to improving understanding of how to help students learn the content. Certification projects include active involvement in the learning, involve the educators themselves in planning the professional development, and can involve collaboration.

On the note of collaboration, every participant spoke positively of, and reported benefiting from, their learning experiences in collaborative forms of learning in their certification projects. These forms included certification classes, certification projects done as a faculty, and certification projects done with one other colleague. A consistently reported benefit of working with others on certification projects was being able to hear others' viewpoints, which could increase or deepen participants' knowledge and understanding of what was being studied and could lead to improved application in the classroom. These findings substantiate the

repeated finding in other research that effective professional development involves collaboration among educators in their learning (Beavers, 2009; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Duron, 1994; Ferman, 2002; Ferrara, 2009; Guskey, 2009; Lee, 2005; Roberts, 2009; Wagner, 2011; Wei, Darling-Hammond, & Adamson, 2010; Wood & Thompson, 1980; Zepeda, 2008).

As an additional characteristic of effective professional development, the time requirement (minimum of approximately 30 hours on a project) allows learning that can be intensive, sustained, and ongoing (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Desimone, 2011). Empirical studies illustrate that durations of 20 hours or more of contact time on a specific topic spread out over a semester, or 49 hours throughout a year, produce meaningful results in educator growth and improved student learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Desimone, 2011). Participants in this study generally spent 20 to 40 hours and between one to nine months on a given certification project.

It should not be assumed, however, that participants experienced more meaningful learning outcomes simply because their learning experiences generally lasted several months and more than 20 hours. Apart from certification classes, participants did not necessarily deliberately plan their learning to stretch across more than two or three months. External factors such as personal and work responsibilities and participants' exhaustion—common challenges experienced by participants in this study and reported in other literature as well (Brookfield, 1993; Guglielmino et al., 2005; Jacka, 1997; Roux, 2013)—could cause the duration to extend over longer periods of time. In addition, some learning activities that contributed to the total number of hours spent, such as formatting written papers, did not contribute to participants' learning outcomes. The type of activity being engaged in influenced whether the hours spent resulted in meaningful learning outcomes.

The experiences of the seminary principal and the assistant principal who did not perceive large professional improvements as a result of their self-directed learning in doing certification projects raise a question as to why. Supportive of other research findings and scholars' assertions, participants in this study had greater motivation, purpose, investment, and engagement in their learning, and their learning activities were more meaningful, when their certification projects were designed to meet immediate personal learning needs (Corabi, 1995; Duron, 1994; Garrison, 1997; Husby, 2005; Jacka, 1997; Slavit & McDuffie, 2013). Further-

more, based on participants' descriptions of their reasons for selecting the certification projects they completed and the outcomes they experienced, in 22 of 24 instances, certification projects that were purposefully chosen to satisfy a compelling professional learning need or interest resulted in beneficial and meaningful outcomes in terms of growth and use. Reports of such outcomes were less frequent for certification projects that were selected because they were offered or certification projects that involved augmenting work tasks participants were already expected to complete.

The extent to which participants experienced growth and improvement was contingent on their conscious and purposeful engagement in their learning activities, which engagement was influenced by their learning being relevant to their professional learning needs or interests. The seminary principal reasoned that one reason he had not experienced large professional improvements may have been because he had done the "wrong" certification projects. Compared to participants who reported experiencing meaningful professional growth, a lower percentage of the certification projects that he and the assistant principal had completed were purposefully selected to satisfy a compelling professional learning need or interest.

These findings indicate a potential need for providing some educators with help in identifying compelling professional learning needs and interests and planning self-directed professional development activities that align (Knowles et al., 2005; Mezirow, 1985; Tough, 1971). Multiple models of self-directed professional development programs include a preliminary self-assessment step in which educators identify areas for professional improvement (e.g., gaps in content knowledge or pedagogical understanding and skills) or interests (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Husby, 2005; Morris & Huffman, 1994; Morgan et al., 2005). The Certification Program lacks such a formal step, but S&I educators' experiences may benefit if one were to be incorporated.

Efforts to gain an understanding of these participants' experiences with self-directed learning in doing certification projects brought to light additional factors that contributed to the likelihood of experiencing meaningful results from doing certification projects. Because this form of self-directed professional development was situated within an organizational context, participants were required to share control over their learning decisions with S&I. For purposes of receiving credit, ultimate approval and validation of participants' efforts rested with their supervisors and S&I central office personnel. The criteria used for granting approval were

based on the requirements and expectations established by S&I administrators.

The requirements and expectations represented the target the participants needed to hit to receive credit for their learning. Because participants' experiences with self-directed learning in doing certification projects were situated in and shaped by the organization (S&I), participants' understanding of the requirements and expectations of doing certification projects influenced their experiences. Most participants indicated a lack of understanding of the requirements and expectations of self-directed learning in doing certification projects. Validation of initial learning experiences, conversations with S&I central office personnel, and seeing models in the form of guided projects increased participants' understanding. Increased understanding of these elements influenced participants' confidence and efficiency in their learning efforts and allowed for their dispositions and capacities for self-directed learning to be most effectively operationalized.

These findings confirm assertions of scholars and research regarding the potential need for some adult learners to receive orientation to, and assistance with, self-directed learning in general (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Candy, 1991), and self-directed professional development in particular (Corabi, 1995). Sufficient orientation can be a means of facilitating the process of self-directed learning, which can help with preventing "a great deal of frustration and misunderstanding" (Guglielmino, 1993, p. 232-233) when implementing programs that require a high level of self-directed learning.

The potential need for assistance was also strongly evidenced by the experience of the seminary assistant principal who possessed research-based personal characteristics of self-directed learners (see Guglielmino, 1978) to a lesser degree than the other participants in the study. He lacked a high level of willingness and capacity to assume responsibility and control over learning decisions. Supportive structures in the form of structured learning experiences and a supportive supervisor provided needed guidance and assistance and enabled him to successfully engage in self-directed learning for purposes of professional development (Grow, 1991). This participant acknowledged that he would not have been as successful in doing certification projects without his supervisor's assistance.

Limitations

The findings of this study reflect seven S&I educators' experiences with self-directed learning for purposes of professional development and their unique contexts. The purposeful sampling criteria used for this study was appropriate for accomplishing the study's purposes. However, it excluded S&I educators located in areas outside of northern Utah. Therefore, these findings may not be reflective of experiences of other religious educators within S&I, educators within other religious organizations, or public educators.

By using a qualitative methodology, the data were gathered and interpreted through the lens of the researcher and the resultant descriptions represent only one interpretation of the data (Moustakas, 1994). Participants' perceptions were relied upon for understanding the professional growth and improvements in their practices as a result of doing certification projects rather than using quantitative methods to quantify their outcomes.

Conclusion and Further Research

The findings of this study demonstrate that self-directed learning can be used as a means to individualize educators' professional development experiences to satisfy their professional learning needs and interests. This study's findings also confirm other research findings regarding the potential effectiveness of self-directed professional development in providing meaningful learning experiences that result in educators' professional growth and improvements in their practice. The findings of this study further validate components of effective professional development established in existing research.

This study supplies valuable knowledge that can also help professionals in other fields who seek to provide meaningful and effective professional development opportunities for their employees. These findings provide support for advocating for the increased use of self-directed professional development for educators, as well as factors to consider in its implementation.

Several implications for further research emerged from this study. Studies exploring the characteristics of educators who do not initiate involvement or persist in self-directed professional development could be conducted. Such research could illustrate how to facilitate their involvement. The experiences of supervisors in working with educators in doing self-directed professional development could also be studied. Grow's (1991) Staged Self-Directed Learning Model could be

used to explore the extent to which supervisors base the support they provide to the educators they supervise on the educators' stage of self-direction.

Studies similar to the present study could be conducted within other educational settings that implement self-directed professional development. Such comparative research could provide additional insights into the experiences and effectiveness of self-directed learning as a form of professional development. Such research could also identify additional ways to enhance the use of this form of professional development so as to improve educators' professional development experiences and ultimately improve the education that is provided to students. Many gains are yet to be realized within this field of professional development.

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