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Study Tours as a Form of Practitioner Research

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Acclaimed storyteller Donald Davis tells the remarkable tale of one of his elementary teachers, Miss Daisy, who decorated her classroom with postcards from around the world. The postcards served as the basis of a year-long curriculum which enabled her students to learn from their “travels” around the world. I, too, remember teachers who shared photographs taken during summer travel adventures that connected to geography, foreign language, and history classroom instruction. Internet images, social media, and organized cross-cultural global initiatives and learning communities enhance opportunities for students and educators to connect virtually to places near and far. Short-term study tours present another avenue of learning for teacher preparation candidates and educators—travel that can have a profound impact on their knowledge and practice.

As National Louis University worked to develop a Center for Practitioner Research and establish a related journal, *i.e.: inquiry in education*, faculty and staff affirmed the definition of practitioner research:

- Practitioner research enables practitioners in educational settings to study and reflect on their practice in a systematic way for the purpose of improving education and learning.
- Practitioner research has the potential to impact education at the student, classroom, school, and district levels. (Center for Practitioner Research, 2008)

Well-planned study tours afford participants the opportunity to study, reflect on, and impact education. A quick review of the literature on short-term study tours by educators revealed two studies confirming the value of short-term study tours:

- The first study examined Jamaican teachers and principals (n=11), tracking the impact of a three-week study tour to England on participants’ personal and professional identities and incorporation of their learning into their teaching, leadership, and relationships (Miller et al., 2015). The tour included visits to 11 institutions. Data collected from four case study participants one year after the trip demonstrated that “the study tour led these teachers to re-evaluate themselves and therefore to reposition themselves and their role in relation to their colleagues and

students,” (p. 28), assuming more leadership and activism in their schools and at a national level.

- In a second study, data collected from University of Saskatchewan graduate students/teachers (n=9) who participated in a two-week study tour to Finland revealed that “all of the teacher participants came to understand that teacher identity and teacher professionalism differ according to economic, political, and social policy” (Orlowski, 2016, p. 34). The tour included visits to two schools and 10 lectures by Finnish teacher educators as well as the advisor, contrasting teachers in Finland with the culture of accountability in Saskatchewan, which continued to increase between 2007 and 2013. Results of the study showed that participants developed increased self-confidence in terms of their roles as professionals.

I myself have been fortunate to participate in study tours to Costa Rica, New Zealand, and Finland. Each trip brought new learning and opportunities to collaborate with local and international colleagues. Based on the preparation ahead of the trip and dissemination of learning following the trip, study tours can be planned as practitioner research. But one key part of the definition of practitioner research is the reference to “systematic” study and reflection. Fundamental to a successful study tour is connecting to international colleagues who can assist in planning your trip, so that you visit the sites and with the individuals that will afford the study group the most learning. The importance of a well-organized study tour is also confirmed by Miller et al. (2015), including “clear activities and learning outcomes aimed at providing opportunities for teachers and principals to experience aspects of a culture and national educational system” (p. 23). In addition, identifying a set questions to be asked, note taking, recordings, and collection of images can assist with systematic data collection. Related reading ahead of and after the trip is also essential. Designating a study tour as a form of *practitioner research* should bring increased energy from and focus of the participants both during and following the trip in terms of impact and outcomes.

The design of a well-planned study tour reminded me of my recent participation in the design of a microcredential for “Engaged Conference Participation.” Designed by teacher educators attending the 2017 National Technology Leadership Conference, three badges can be earned related to conference planning, conference attendance, and conference impact (e.g., National Technology Leadership Summit, n.d.). Badge requirements assure that either graduate students attending their first national conference or seasoned faculty implement steps to gain the most benefit from attending a conference, such as emailing requests to meet up with a presenter or other attendees, strategically identifying business meetings to cultivate collaborative relationships, and disseminating knowledge/information gained through social media or local professional development opportunities. The elements of this microcredential mirror important elements of a successful study tour—informed planning, connecting well ahead with onsite presenters and tour sites, and documenting learning and impact.

This issue of *i.e.: inquiry in education* features articles by six participants in a study tour to Finland in 2017 and by Finnish authors, many of whom tour participants met during their trip. Together they present a description of the vision for and design of Finnish education, facilitating

the reader's comparison of elements and outcomes of education in Finland, the U.S., and more broadly.

Articles by Burg and Nauman present a convincing case for revisioning education in the U.S., pushing back on neoliberalism with a view to collaboration instead of competition, and a holistic view of student development over a singular focus on achievement. Nauman examines underlying cultural values, while Burg compares population size and monetary investment in education. Each concludes with powerful projections for the U.S. to become a “world leader in education” (Burg) with “power to bring stability and well-being to a whole society” through public education (Nauman).

Articles by the three Finnish authors provide a tutorial on the structure of Finnish education, underlying philosophy, and pedagogical foundations. Rinkinen places educational decision making in a world context, examining themes that “have proved to be challenging, but at the same time important...to balance.” Pollari, Salo, and Koski provide an overview of the Finnish system of education, early childhood through university, followed by a discussion of the roles of and respect for teachers. An in-depth look at teacher preparation is provided, including admission criteria, teacher training schools, and clinical practices. A unique feature of the latter is the opportunity for practicing teachers, teacher candidates, and university faculty to participate in teaching experiments and research. Soukainen provides insight into local participation in the development of the new Finnish national core curriculum, with an emphasis on early childhood education. She provides information on availability, costs, teacher–pupil ratio, and public/private options, and affirms the importance of a focus on children's needs as individuals. Most interesting is that “the target of ECEC is aimed at the [school] personnel; therefore, the child's individual...plan lays out what the personnel should do to support the child's development.”

Soukainen's confirmation that early childhood teachers work with children to assure that a “joy of learning will remain” aligns with Imam's description of a book by Timothy Walker, *Teach Like Finland*. In her book review, Imam reveals that Walker relocated from the U.S. and became a teacher in Finland, finding and subsequently sharing strategies for establishing peaceful, collaborative, and joyful learning environments. Likewise, in a commentary on the Finnish study tour, I share a summary of a book chapter focused on change and school culture. Coauthored by a faculty member at the University of Jyväskylä, the chapter refers to expectations that teacher training programs include preparation of candidates to “lead change in the development of school culture” and collaboration as a learning community.

References to culture also appear in the final two articles in this issue. Imam and Jabeen reflect on practices in Finnish education that they found relevant for public and private schools in the U.S., including Islamic schools, and Jabeen describes several innovative ideas incorporated at her school following the study tour. In their article, they also affirm their observations in Finland of a high level of trust in the school community: “We were convinced that there was joy in learning. We saw firsthand a trust between the stakeholders.” Price makes an eloquent connection to a Finnish epic poem, *The Kalevala*, in his discussion of educational reform in Finland. To support his points, Price shares detailed descriptions of encounters during four school visits, from early childhood through adult education for Finnish-language learners who

had relocated to Finland. His article confirms study of the Sahlberg text (2015) before the trip, and continued exploration of Finnish education during and after the trip.

As you read articles in this issue, I believe you will notice the overlap between what the authors from the U.S. and Finland report about Finnish education. You may also note the frequent reference to Sahlberg's book, *Finnish Lessons 2.0* (2015), which provides a scholarly and comprehensive examination of the evolution and exemplary educational principles of Finnish education. As you read articles by the National Louis study tour participants, I believe you will see the outcomes of their roles as practitioner researchers—who learned ahead of, during, and following their travels. And finally, I hope that like Miss Daisy, you will encourage your students to learn through their visits to and study of learning in settings both near and far.

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