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Professional Learning Communities: A Vehicle for Global Learning

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ABSTRACT

This article describes how Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were implemented with 110 Indian teacher educators who completed a three-month residency program at a large university in the southwest United States. Using structured opportunities and safe space, Indian educators engaged in critical thinking and discussion about local educational issues and were able to explore ideas for local reform while generating new solutions. Results indicate that PLC structures that were established in the United States assisted them in understanding the local issues better and provided them with tools for long-term and sustainable changes that they could use after they were back in their own communities. Findings have implications for researchers and teacher educators who are involved with creating professional learning opportunities for educators across the world.

Keywords: Professional learning communities, global learning, teacher education, teachers

1. INTRODUCTION

Global learning is viewed as an educational process where all stakeholders (including faculty, students and staff) participate and engage in creating knowledge, skills and attitudes about the world's issues that affect schools, students, and teachers (Hovland, 2014). Global

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learning is an effective method for educational change and reform. Some professionals view change as a chaotic and unpredictable process that is guided by an ideology or a fad rather than a process that results from systematic learning from people in professions (Abrams, 2016; Adamson *et al.*, 2016; Shirley, 2016). For example, in the United States of America, the legislative passing of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) emphasized standard-based reform and expanded the federal role in public education while emphasizing annual testing and academic progress, school report cards, teacher evaluation, and significant funding changes. Though NCLB provided a framework for the evaluation of student performance through use of standards-based measures – it was recognized that this top-down approach toward school governance was not effective in establishing the most effective educational experience for all students. Educators were removed from a decision-making role within their classrooms; with summative measures of student performance serving as primary indicator of educator effectiveness.

Many education critics and policy makers viewed NCLB as detrimental to school success due to several reasons including negative effects on students with disabilities, English language learners, and minority populations. Many professionals resisted this change by refusing to implement NCLB standards or creating variations they deemed more useful. As time has passed, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers have shared their understanding of the issues resulting from NCLB igniting suggested changes at the federal level, resulting in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) on December 10, 2015. ESSA affords more local control and flexibility in schools with regards to setting their own standards for measuring school and student performance. Examination of the detrimental impact of the NCLB model suggested value of a framework for collaboration and consultation among educators both at their local level – as well as within their content area of expertise and specialization.

When the need for reform is carefully studied and is guided by a research-based process and evidence that improves learning (Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Payne, 2008), it is likely to be accepted by educators. Governmental policies that are implemented without professional guidance from the field is an example of unpredictable change having potential for unintended negative outcomes. For example, zero tolerance policies that were implemented as a means of managing undesirable student behavior in traditional US schools often result in negative student outcomes such as high dropout rates, juvenile delinquency, and disengagement (Skiba, and Rausch, 2005). Many professionals came together to discuss the negative outcomes resulting from these policies, and suggested modifications and adjustments (Shirley and

MacDonald 2016; Zhao, 2009) and the need for positive change in disciplinary practices in schools.

Both predictable and unpredictable events and trends can offer opportunities for global learning in the teaching profession. In order to promote healthy change, it is important that both time and creative learning environments are afforded to educators where they can discuss policy-related issues, share wisdom with peers, and use methodologies that are open ended and flexible. When educators have opportunities to collaboratively examine their day-to-day practice, engage in reflective dialogue for continuing conversations about curriculum and instruction, and review research findings outside of the classroom settings, they are more apt to acquire new knowledge, skills and attitudes that promote the creation of new ideas and solutions to global issues.

World as a global classroom. When educators view the world as a global society with multiple forms of diversity, they have the potential to create the flexible environment necessary to allow diverse learners to consolidate their innovative ideas. They connect and learn with and from each other, where there is no hierarchy of learning, and no single dominant group delivering the information to another group because all voices are equal.

Collaborative thinking is central to the creation of global learning opportunities and requires latitude for creating and exchanging ideas and then practicing those ideas in safe nonjudgmental environment. The introduction of global customs, traditions, language and ideologies into the learning environment brings excitement and engagement for learners. By discussing teaching practices that globally affect learners from all countries, educators can enhance personal awareness about their local areas and can begin to recognize new teaching opportunities in all types of landscapes from small towns in underdeveloped countries to metropolitan cities in first-world countries.

The opportunity to create new solutions to old problems is not only an exciting venture for many educators, but also creates ownership of the idea. Global learning in the teaching profession can result in four outcomes (Hovland, 2014; Schachter, 2011) related to educators' knowledge base, skills, attitudes, and application.

1. Gaining knowledge about world problems faced by teachers and students. If we want school children to work for a better world, teachers must expose them to the nature of world problems, their causes, and viable solutions.

2. Acquiring skills that are necessary to solve world problems. These skills are: better communication, critical and creative thinking, cooperative problem-solving, conflict resolution, informed decision making, and the ability to see issues from multiple perspectives.

3. Attaining global attitudes that include global awareness, curiosity, an appreciation of other cultures, respect for diversity, a commitment to justice, and empathy with others.

4. Creating global education that relies on democratic participation in the local and global community to solve world problems in teaching.

Statement of Purpose: The purpose of this article is to describe and examine the process by which Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were implemented within the three-month residency program for 110 Indian educators. PLCs created structured opportunities for Indian educators to engage in critical thinking and discussion about educational issues in their local areas that were oftentimes connected with global issues. The article also articulates the rationale for why PLCs were considered an appropriate vehicle for global learning and capacity building for both Indian and US educators. Readers are encouraged to contact the authors for additional details on the whole three-month residency program consisting of core coursework in teaching and learning, technology, gender equity, ethics, democracy, philosophy in education, leadership and electives. School visits, living arrangements, and Indo-US community building activities were also a significant part of this experience. However, the focus of this article is to only describe the role and rationale for PLCs within the residency program and the process of implementation and evaluation.

2. PLCS FOR GLOBAL LEARNING AND CAPACITY BUILDING

A PLC is defined as a group of educators working together toward a common goal. These groups of educators serve as a professional community of learners, who share expertise and work collaboratively to improve teaching skills and academic performance of students (DuFour *et al.,* 2008). A PLC model has the potential to establish a mechanism by which knowledge, awareness and expertise at the local level could be extended to engage and inform the state, national, and global educational community. PLCs are not a prescriptive, one-size fits all approach, or an insular way of gaining skills and knowledge. Instead, they systematically provide support to educators in making decisions based on local contexts, professional goals, and student needs. PLCs inherently acknowledge the importance of existing knowledge, experiential learnings, and scholarly research theory. Through collaborative inquiry, educators

explore new ideas, and examine and refine their current practice to improve student learning (DuFour *et al.*, 2008).

Research indicates that educators from developing countries are accustomed to complying with a top-down approach and less engaged with collaborative problem solving processes at the grass root levels (Fullan and Watson, 1999; Sai and Siraj, 2015). Their knowledge base about collaborative processes comes from theoretical information they have received from trainings or coursework and not necessarily from actual engagement in peer collaboration that supports local action (Fullan and Watson, 1999; Sai and Siraj, 2015; Verger, Altinyelken, and Koning, 2013). Although the educational contexts of the two countries, USA and India, are quite different, PLCs were considered an important component of the residency program to facilitate a culture of collaborative problem solving and critical thinking around several global educational issues that are relevant for both countries.

2.1 Educational Context of the US

All children from kindergarten to 12th grade (k-12) have access to free and compulsory education. The state governments set overall educational standards, often mandate standardized tests for the public school systems and provide tracking and monitoring of policies. About 90% of school-age children attend public schools, about 10% attend private schools or are home-schooled. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) passed in 1965 and provided funds for primary and secondary education. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act established funding for special education in schools in 1975. These laws have contributed toward making education equitable and accessible for children with and without disabilities. More recently, in December 2015, President Barack Obama signed legislation replacing NCLB with the Every Student Succeeds Act allowing more flexibility in decision making for the local education agencies.

In 1986, the Carnegie Task Force produced a report called Teaching as a Profession that emphasized the effective teachers would produce better students. The Holmes Group (1986) consisting of a professional group of university deans, scholars, analysts, policy makers, and teachers and teacher educators argued for the need to build a more knowledgeable and skillful professional teaching force. As a result, policy initiatives have launched, professional standards have been designed to strengthen teacher education and certification requirements. Schools have been encouraged to increase investments in

induction programs, mentoring and professional development, and transformed roles for teachers. Despite initiatives towards making teaching a profession, there have been several attacks on teacher education and intense debates have occurred about whether preparing and supporting teachers make a difference. Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) has summarized the complexity of these issues as follows. *"For teacher education, this is perhaps the best of times and the worst of times. It may be the best of times because so much hard work has been done by many teacher educators over the past two decades… It may equally be the worst of times because there are so many forces in the environment that conspire to undermine these efforts"* (p. 35).

2.2 Context of India.

Just like in the US, several laws and policies in India have been passed after the independence in 1947 to establish educational rights for all children. The three major developments in recent years provide the background to the present changes and reform in teacher education. These developments include (1) political recognition of Universalization of Elementary Education that led to the Right to Education Bill, 2008; (2) the Persons with Disabilities Act and (3) the formulation of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) for school education, 2005. The essence of the Right to Education Bill is to provide free and compulsory education to all children in India without discrimination. The Right to Education Act mandates the states to provide free and compulsory education to children ages 6 to 14. The Persons with Disabilities Act outlines the basic rights for children with disabilities. These laws mandate a free education for children with equal access to learning opportunities, equity, and respectful treatment and attempt to reduce the social divide between the education of the rich and the poor. The laws provide guidance for minimum qualifications of teachers and quality of educational experiences, curriculum, and instructional process (National Council for Teacher Education, 2009). In 2005, the formulation of NCF assisted in viewing teaching as a profession and not just a process of transmission of facts (NCERT, 2005, p. viii). The NCF framework emphasized equity, access, use of community resources in education, integration of technology, and e-learning in curriculum development and instruction.

To promote the overall quality of teacher education and to organize pre-service and in-service training opportunities for teachers, the State Councils of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) and District Institutes of Education and Training (DIET) were established. These laws and initiatives have increased the demand for qualified elementary school teachers

who could assist in making education more equitable, engaging, and effective for all students. The Government of India has extended tremendous effort toward changing teacher education to be more accessible, inquiry-based, inclusive and democratic in values and ideals.

A three-month residency program was designed to assist Indian teacher educators to meet the local, regional, and national challenges by reforming their own practices in ways that align with national priorities and aspirations for 21st century education. It was based on the premise that by engaging in critical reflection and interaction with others who share similar training, educators increase their professional knowledge and enhance student-learning experience (Buysse, Sparkman, and Wesley, 2003).

3. METHOD

3.1 Participants and Setting

Participating Indian educators (*n*=110), were selected by the government of India, Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) to complete a three-month residency program at a state university located in the southwest region of the US. The residency program was offered in two cohorts, the first (Cohort 1) in fall 2013 (*n*=53) and the second (Cohort 2) in fall 2014 (*n*=57). Indian educators represented the northeastern states of India including Uttar Pradesh, Uttaranchal, Assam, Odisha, Bihar, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Chhattisgarh, and Madhya Pradesh. Most participants were teacher educators representing their DIETS accompanied by a few administrators and lecturers from the state teacher education agencies. Participants represented a wide range of proficiency in spoken and written English and technology. Before coming to the US, participants went through a pre-departure orientation that prepared them for successful entry into the unfamiliar culture of the host state university and the US and for understanding the expectations of the residency program in teacher education.

All Indian educators in both cohorts participated in theoretical and experiential learning opportunities consisting of coursework, the local school visits, and PLCs. The coursework for Cohort 1 included instruction in technology, gender equity, ethics, democracy, effective instruction and PLCs. MHRD in collaboration with Indian teacher education experts requested some changes to the coursework for Cohort 2 to include a strong foundational background in philosophy of education, gender equity concerns, and electives. PLCs were viewed as an important component of the program for both Cohorts. Each cohort stayed together during the residency program consisting of coursework and onsite and offsite educational and social experiences. Both cohorts were given the opportunity to experience the field-based teacher

education in the US and compare to their own local contexts in India. Faculty from the host university in the US provided them with continuous coaching, mentoring, and feedback as the cohorts examined their existing knowledge and acquired new ideas and skills. The local school visits provided insight to the field component of teacher preparation and the host university's partnerships with local schools.

3.2 Procedure

Indian educators came from various states from the northeastern region and did not have experience of collaborating with each other prior to getting selected for the residency program. In order to encourage and foster Indian educators' involvement in PLCs, it was important to spend time in developing trust with each other. Trust building exercises were incorporated where Indian educators had to rely on each other for day to day activities such as getting groceries and food items, making arrangements for transportation, sharing information on assignments, working with technology, etc. In addition, it was essential to consider differing attitudes towards collaboration and design the PLCs in a way where Indian educators would feel safe and comfortable in sharing ideas and opinions.

1. Developed a Course.

To provide fundamentals of PLCs, a professional development course was developed where Indian educators were taught the basic concepts and tenets of PLCs. The course topics included: Theoretical framework of PLCs; rationale, benefits, and essential ingredients; evolution of PLCs, shared values, collective inquiry, and goals; effective facilitation with equity and inclusion; evaluation of PLCs; the need for PLCs for local reform; structuring and implementing PLCs in local settings; and structuring PLCs in educational reform proposals. Cohort 1 received ten 1-hour sessions in the course topic of the week. Cohort members engaged in the first part of the session as a large group. The instructor presented the PLC topic and discussed the readings and case studies weekly. For example, the topic for the first week was theoretical framework of PLCs and the differences between training and professional development as it relates to teacher learning were discussed. The differences between issues of pre-service and in-service were highlighted. Following the instructor's presentation, cohort members participated in their own PLCs for 20-25 minutes and discussed the relevance of the content in their local context.

Instruction time for Cohort 2 was extended to two hours based on the feedback received from Indian educators in Cohort 1. In the first hour of each session, Cohort 2 members

developed the concepts and elements in larger groups. This was followed by a 1–hour engagement in PLCs.

2. Developed Rationale

The role of PLCs in collective inquiry was discussed. A rationale was developed for why PLCs were a reasonable choice to foster a sense of community of practice and to develop a widely shared vision and sense of purpose. Common needs and issues facing teacher education in two democracies were identified. Examples included: a lack of connection between theory and practice in teacher education; issues of gender inequity in elementary school teachers (more female teachers and less male teachers); classroom management and discipline; issues of poverty, social disadvantage, and homelessness. Etiquettes and norms of involvement and decision-making were explored to ensure all voices were equal and there was no dominate group.

3. Established PLC Culture

Collaborative learning as a purposeful activity was established. Processes requiring collaboration do not come easy to all members, particularly those from communities that are accustomed to working in formal hierarchical structures. It was important to establish collegial relationships across all age groups, positions, locations, and gender as these factors relate to the educational outcomes for students. Global issues surrounding the teaching profession were identified. Emphases were given to issues that appeared to be within the cohort's control and were referred to as alterable conditions. Factors that were beyond control were discussed and were identified as unalterable. PLCs served as a vehicle for global learning, where Indian educators worked together and shared commitment to incorporate collaborative practices for local reforms.

4. Created PLC Structures

The formal structures of educational agencies represented by Indian educators, such as SCERTS and DIETS were discussed. The formal US educational system including local education agencies, the US Department of Education, State Department of Education/Certification and Exceptional Student Services were also shared. An effort was made to create a dynamic and tacit design to promote linkages between professional learning and local reform (Wenger, 1998). PLCs were viewed as collegial groups of professionals with a shared commitment to higher levels of learning for themselves and for preschool to 12^{th} grade students. The PLCs also developed a shared vision of local reform. Participants worked and learned collaboratively, they developed interdependence and engaged in joint decision-making

(DuFour *et al.*, 2008). As a professional development approach, they were encouraged to develop their own "community of practice" where they engaged in collaborative inquiry, problem solving, and reflection to generate and share new learning about issues and solutions. Cohort 1 relied primarily on geographical proximity (e.g., participants from one state preferred to be with educators from the same state), whereas Cohort 2 chose to form their own PLCs based on their topic interest (e.g., those interested in math joined together).

5. Facilitated PLCs

During the PLCs discussions, many Indian educators shared that their educational systems had traditionally been highly hierarchical. Structures for community building, grouping and peer learning were nonexistent. This was evidenced by beliefs that they were expected to follow the rules and instructions established by DIET and SCERT. They reported they had limited input in the selection of instructional modes, curriculum, textbooks, and topics of professional development. Their reflection corroborated the findings from research conducted in several developing countries including India (Sai and Siraj, 2015; Shah, 2015, Westbrook *et al.*, 2013). The concept of lifelong learning was not fully understood or implemented despite changes in the global discourse on lifelong learning and its advocacy by transnational organizations like the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization **(**UNESCO) and the European Commission (Shah, 2015).

Two graduate students assisted in the facilitation of PLC group processing. Eleven PLCs were established in Cohort 1 and seven in Cohort 2. Group facilitators were designated for each cohort. Various ways to define PLCs were discussed, such as role-based PLCs (reading vs. math teacher) and expertise-based PLCs (elementary vs. secondary). Each definition distinguished a unique type of grouping or highlighted specific aspects related to the purpose and function of the respective group. During these discussions, Indian educators were asked to develop a shared mission and vision, articulate collective commitments based on consensus, and develop specific goals and plans.

During PLCs, opportunities were created for Indian educators to reflect on their own learning of new concepts and to clarify weekly concerns related to their coursework, readings, and other critical issues. They were encouraged to connect program content, discussions, and readings to the development of reform proposals. They assisted one another in aligning newly learned concepts within the development of their reform proposals. They were asked to situate their local reform plans in a larger global context and were encouraged to envision the importance of widespread changes while setting realistic and measurable reform goals.

6. Evaluated PLC course

Much of the evidence base is derived from self-report by Indian educators, reflection of the PLC instructor and facilitators, and course evaluation data.

Self-report surveys were gathered from participants requesting them to highlight the aspects of PLCs that seemed to work for them in their local reform, challenges they encountered and supports they received after they went back to India. Findings and reflections are discussed in the results and discussion section.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As mentioned earlier, PLCs' configurations for the two cohorts were different. Cohort 1 relied primarily on geographical proximity, whereas Cohort 2 chose to form their own PLCs. The Meghalaya PLC in Cohort 1 was one of the highly functioning groups that continued to work collaboratively upon their return to India. This PLC was strategic and coordinated in their design encouraging each member wrote a reform proposal that supported a different key aspect of the statewide teacher education context: school internships, student teacher assessments, classroom practices, information and communication technologies, professional development of teacher educators, and protocols.

About 30% participants consisting of 17 of 53 in Cohort 1 and 22 of 57 in Cohort 2 responded to self-report surveys. While some Indian educators reported challenges gaining their colleagues' support, the majority (9/17; 53%) of Cohort 1 respondents indicated that their coworkers have been supportive of reform initiatives. For Cohort 2, the majority (14/22; 64%) felt their colleagues were supportive in helping them create change. They were also asked about the helpfulness of the various types of support. The two most helpful forms of support reported by Cohort 1 were emotional support (13/43; 30%) and observation feedback (12/43; 28%). For Cohort 2, the most helpful forms of support included coordination (13/44; 30%), observation feedback (9/44; 20%), advocacy (7/44; 16%), emotional support (7/44; 16%), and feedback (6/44; 14%). They were asked if they were continuing with their PLCs that were initiated at the host university in the US. Survey respondents (13/17; 76%) indicated a range of collaboration from some to a substantial amount that continued with the members of their PLC. 32% (7/22) of Cohort 2 respondents reported some collaboration with members of their PLC, while 27% (6/22) reported collaboration taking place a lot of the time.

Participants were queried whether new PLCs were created with local colleagues. The majority (15/17; 77%) of Cohort 1 stated that they did not continue with the same PLC members. Participants reported phone calls, email and social media as the method to best

collaborate within a supportive PLC. Additionally, many participants reported WhatsApp and face-to-face meetings as being useful. Cohort 2 closely mirrored Cohort 1 in the creation of new PLCs. Results indicate that with structured opportunities, a range of learning experiences, and meaningful human and social resources, PLCs became one of their preferred methods for experiential learning. Even if they were not able to continue with the structures that were established at the host university, they created their own PLC structures that were meaningful for their local settings.

5. WITNESSING THE PROCESS: REFLECTIONS

US teacher educators from the host university created their own PLC and shared experiences to modify instruction. They saw the need to be sensitive to various educational backgrounds and cultural norms and stayed open and receptive to curricular and instructional adaptations. US educators learned about the role of Indian government in administering local public education and organizations in reaching the hardest to reach in attitudes and dispositions or difficult to reach geographically. Educators in the US gained an appreciation for the fact that the Indian educators effortlessly managed large class sizes (40 to 50) with limited resources and infrastructure. They were amazed to learn that almost all Indian educators were bilingual or multilingual. In general, US educators reported that PLCs appeared very interested in what they were learning, were conscientious, and were respectful of the instructors/professors. US educators took notice of distribution of power in PLCs in how Indian educators were willing to listen to those who had recognized positions in their communities while sometimes not actively attending to the ideas of those who are seen as less influential. They also developed a more critical view of gender inequality as it related to the experiences of girls and women in India.

By allowing for open and honest discussions within PLCs, participants oftentimes reported that they were experiencing similar issues and pressures as other colleagues from different states of India. Not only that, they also realized some of the pressures were similar to those faced by educators in the US. By engaging in collaborative learning processes, it was possible to generate solutions to the common issues. One of the participant from Cohort 1 stated “I have learned how to promote learning through collaboration. PLC is really helpful in sharing expertise, ideas and knowledge. My student teachers shared their skills in the field of technology.” In response to how they were bringing changes to their local settings, one participant from Cohort 2 stated “Now we are institutionalizing PLCs in the system by making

it mandatory for schools to get scores in their evaluation. They are using social media to connect. PLCs on science experiments, math, sports, and quality education are being formed. Now, I am planning to develop some guidelines for PLCs and experiments in science and language teaching for early grades." Another pointed out "…it will be more beneficial if the participants from different countries will be invited instead of only one country."

In July and December of 2015, faculty members of the host university from the US made site visits to India and had the opportunity to meet with several Indian educators from both cohorts. The findings from the meetings and site visits also indicated that Indian educators had taken the concepts of PLCs and applied them as they saw them fit in their own environments. In a close out event that was scheduled in March 2016, about 30 Indian educators came to attend the event and shared their reflections about various program components of the residency program. 90% of them indicated that they were using PLCs and were finding the framework of PLCs to be extremely meaningful and beneficial in moving reform agenda forward in their local settings. They were impressed with the use of inclusive practices and positive behavior supports in the US schools and were ensuring that they were also applying similar strategies in their local settings. Indian educators appreciated learning about collaborative learning structures, such as co-teaching and few were able to apply that in their settings. They appreciated time management strategies, hands on activities in classrooms, and planning and delivery of instruction. For many Indian educators, this involved a shift from passive to active learning, from teacher- to student-centered classes.

6. CONCLUSION

This article focuses on experiences with 110 Indian educators who went through the process of establishing collaborative learning structures of PLCs. Peer learning, shared vision and collaborative structures that are viewed as essential elements for effective PLCs (Wei *et al.*, 2009) served them really well even after they moved back to their local settings in India. They continue to share information with the host faculty from the US about how PLCs transformed their own thought process about professional learning and how with new learnings, attitudes and values, they are continuing to work toward bringing local changes. They continue to share, with the host faculty from the US, their products (videos, media clip, and published articles) that show how they have transformed their own thought process of professional learning. With new learnings, attitudes and values, they are continuing to work toward bringing local changes. The cohorts learned how to create self-organized learning environments.

Additionally, they are now able to connect with their counterparts in India in meaningful ways in order to co-construct new knowledge about global learning and are implementing local reforms in Indian teacher education.

Discussions within the PLCs provided opportunities for better understanding of local issues, developing creative solutions, and promoting collaborative partnerships with other professionals. Both Indian and US educators raised their awareness about issues that their respective democracies were facing, such as gender equity, racial parity, poverty and social disadvantage. Although the local contexts for professional learning in the two countries are quite different, PLCs provided educators from both the countries to build a culture of collaborative problem solving and critical thinking around global educational issues. The findings indicated that PLCs not only supported local reforms in India but also developed broader understandings of global issues that the profession of teacher education currently experience.

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