Rangsit Journal of Educational Studies
Volume 6, No.2 (July-December 2019)
DOI: 10.14456/rjes.2019.12

Designing a Professional Development Program for English Teachers: Insights from the Lower Mekong Initiative

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Abstract

There is an assumption that professional development will result in teacher learning of new knowledge and/or influence the new beliefs which will in turn change the ways they teach (Desimone, 2009). There is some consensus among various scholars in the field (e.g. Garet et al., 2001; Desimone, 2009; Van Veen et al., 2012; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017) that certain features in the design of professional development activities can effectively promote opportunities for teacher learning. To illustrate these principles more clearly, this article presents a case of professional development opportunity for teachers of English as a second or foreign language who were working on a multinational collaborative project in the Lower Mekong sub-region of South East Asia. Embedded within the activities that the teachers engaged, this project reflects seven characteristics of successful professional development program, namely (1) sustained duration, (2) content focus, (3) professional coherence, (4) active learning, (5) collective participation, (6) coaching and modeling, and (7) feedback and reflection.

Keywords: Professional Development Program, ESL Teachers, EFL Teachers, Lower Mekong

Introduction

In a general sense, professional development (PD) activities are conducted to encourage workers to develop and apply new knowledge and skills in order to improve their job performance. According to Guskey (2002), the main reason for organizing a PD program for teachers is to bring about change in their beliefs, attitudes and practices. It is assumed that teacher knowledge, as a result of attending PD programs, can help them teach more effectively and yield a better outcome in student learning. However, Avalos (2011, p.10) contends that teacher learning is "a complex process which requires cognitive and emotional involvement of teachers individually and collectively." Thus, learning may or may not occur during PD activities and change in practice is not guaranteed even though learning occurs. The certain PD conditions from which teachers gain conviction in implementing the change and sustaining such change in their own practices are still not well-understood (Molle, 2010).

This article presents perspectives of a case – a PD opportunity – for teachers of English as a second/ foreign language. The nature of this teacher learning opportunity may not fit neatly into a particular mold of typical PD formats but as Desimone (2009) argues, it is more important to understand the characteristics of a PD activity that are critical to the emergence of teacher learning and later on facilitate the change in teacher practice than to determine the type of activity. First of all, the article will describe the context where the reported PD opportunity arose

for English teachers. This will be followed by a brief literature review of principles for effective PD design. The third section then discusses the reported case in relation to these principles and offers how English teachers' participation in this PD was likely to lead to learning and, subsequently, change. The paper concludes with implications for future design of PD programs for English teachers.

Lower Mekong Initiative's English Support Project

The Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) is a multinational commitment and partnership between the US government and the governments of the five countries in the Lower Mekong basin, namely Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam to promote common understanding, strengthen cooperation and develop shared responses to the most pressing cross-border development challenges in the six main areas, known as LMI Pillars, of Agriculture and Food Security, Connectivity, Education, Energy Security, Environment and Water, and Health.

The Education Pillar, which is co-chaired by the US and the Thai governments, aims to promote sustainable growth through capacity-building, creating platforms for policy dialogue, and facilitating opportunities for exchange of expertise and best practices. Regarding English learning and teaching, the LMI Education Pillar has a strategic goal to "use creative ways to develop technical English language ability among experts working in the fields of the LMI pillars…" (http://lowermekong.org) Accordingly, the Professional Communication Skills for Leaders (PCSL) Project was developed to enhance English proficiency among mid- to upper-level government officials so that they can participate actively in pillar-specific LMI and other regional meetings. For these government officials, the English training received through PCSL is considered a form of professional development for them as the enhanced English proficiency helps them perform their jobs better and leads to opportunities to increase their professional skills and knowledge through dialogues and collaboration.

So far, publications on the LMI PCSL project (e.g. Damrongmanee 2013; Limkomolvilas, 2016; Nuangpolmak, 2017; LMI PCSL English Project, 2017) have mostly focused on either the design of the English training components or the PCSL curricular material itself. Little attention has been paid to the other essential component of professional development embedded within this project. In other words, PCSL not only fosters the development of the government officials' (i.e. the trainees) professional English, but also creates opportunities and environment for professional learning among the English teachers (i.e. the trainers) who worked on the project. Between 2012 and 2017, there were more than 60 English language teachers, both native speakers (i.e. US language fellows) and non-native speakers (i.e. local teachers in the Lower Mekong region), involved in the delivery of PCSL training.

With the encompassing LMI goals of sustainability and capacity building, the delivery of PCSL training adopted the co-teaching model where the native and non-native English-speaking teachers worked in partnership to enact the curriculum. This practice of classroom collaboration

is however not common where international educational projects are concerned. Many projects of this nature (such as those run by Peace Corps) mostly have native speakers perform the task of teaching English in the host country while local teachers play the secondary role of assisting or just simply observe (Perry, 2016).

In contrast, the partnership between the US English Language Fellows and the local English teachers in the LMI PCSL project was that of a non-hierarchical one in that they 'co-taught' the lessons. That is to say, both the native English-speaking teacher and the non-native English-speaking teacher would be present in the classroom at the same time; one might lead the class activities while the other could take a more supporting role. For the partnership to work, the teachers must develop a good working relationship where they not only discussed and made plans to teach, but also monitored performance, reflected outcome and provided constructive feedback to one another. Besides the in-country partnerships, where two local teachers from each of the five Lower Mekong countries and one American Fellow assigned to such country worked together, these teachers were also part of a multinational teaching team, collaborating for the success of the project as a whole.

It should also be noted that the English teachers, especially those from the Lower Mekong, participated in the LMI PCSL project mainly for professional development aspiration as they had to do so on top of their already heavy workload, and with only small compensation. For many of these teachers, the opportunities to work on international projects and/or collaborate with colleagues outside their own institutions are rare.

Effective Design for Teachers' Professional Development

According to Guskey (2000, p.16), professional development (PD) for teachers encompasses "any processes and activities designed to enhance the professional knowledge, skills and attitudes of educators so that they might, in turn, improve the learning of students." A further distinction has been made between the traditional PD that involves some form of training by the experts taking place outside of teachers' workplace and the "reform type" activities which operate within teachers' daily practice (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman & Yoon, 2001, p.920). Similarly, Van Veen, Zwart, and Meirink (2012, p.3) propose the term "innovative" PD to distinguish activities where teachers take an active role to engage in issues that are situated in their daily practice from those traditional PD such as talks, seminars, or workshops where teachers attend passively.

Participation in PD may stem from two different reasons. First, professionals themselves are motivated to engage in PD as a means to keep their knowledge and skills up-to-date, with a hope of career advancement. Second, it is a method whereby competence and standards can be verified by professional associations and employers (Friedman & Phillips, 2004). For the latter reason, PD is considered especially important in the work of teachers as it can impact student learning (Guskey, 2002; Desimone, 2009). While Desimone (2009) claims that participation in

PD will increase teachers' knowledge and skills and/or change their attitudes and beliefs, with which they will use to improve their teaching, which in turn will lead to increased student learning, Guskey (2002) comments that the change in teachers' attitudes and beliefs is not a reason for changes in teaching but is more likely prompted by witnessing student achievement as a result of their improved teaching. In any cases, it can be argued that PD will lead to teacher learning and teacher change (Garet et al., 2001). Hence, it is crucial that PD activities are designed to be effective in this regard.

Although there is insufficient empirical evidence to prescribe the 'ideal' PD, review studies of successful PD programs (e.g. Garet et al., 2001; Desimone, 2009; Van Veen et al., 2012; Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017) more or less inform the common core features characterizing the PD activity that 'works'. Guskey (2000) emphasizes that a PD activity must be intentional, ongoing and systematic. It should be designed deliberately with planned goals in mind. Guskey also advocates the continuous job-embedded PD which allows systematic monitoring of change. In similar vein, Garet el al. (2001) view the characteristics of PD in two aspects: structural and core features. The former aspect deals with the design of PD activities while the latter refers to the substance of PD experience. In terms of design, effective PD activities are often in the reform format where PD is embedded within normal practice of teachers, span over a period of time, and promote collective participation (i.e. school-based rather than on individual basis). Meanwhile, it is claimed that teacher learning is likely to occur if PD experience is focused on their disciplinary content, coherent with their teaching goals, and oriented to active learning.

Built directly upon the work of Garet et al (2001), Desimone (2009) contends that it may be more useful to focus on the characteristics of the activity rather than the type of activity; hence, summarizes the five critical features of effective PD as duration, content focus, coherence, active learning, and collective participation. By disregarding the strict description of PD format, the critical features of the activity can be judged on their own merits. For example, PD in the form of workshop can still be effective if its design adheres to reform-oriented principles (Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi and Gallagher, 2007). Later, Van Veen et al. (2012) argue that not only should PD be discipline-focused but the content provided must also be of high quality. In their views, it is imperative that the design of PD content be closely related to best practice as supported by theory and research. Adding to Desimone's five features, Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) posits the use of coaching and modeling as well as the opportunities for feedback and reflection as other crucial characteristics of successful PD. In the next section, these desirable features of PD will be illustrated in relation to the LMI PCSL project, with the main focus on how participating in this project can contribute to the English teachers' professional learning.

Features of LMI PCSL Contributing to Effective Professional Development

As mentioned earlier, the PCSL Project was funded by the US and the Thai governments to promote professional English skills of mid- to upper-level government officials, from the five Lower Mekong countries. The LMI PCSL ran for five years and in each project year teachers were actively engaged with the project for 10 months (September to June). During the ten months, each teaching team (comprised of one US fellow and two local teachers) delivered a 30-hour English training to the government officials in their respective Lower Mekong countries, using the specifically designed PCSL curriculum, six times (one for each LMI Pillar). The interval between each training session was about three to five weeks.

The design of PCSL curriculum and training adopted English for Specific Purposes (ESP) framework which aimed to equip the Lower Mekong government officials with specific language skills required for multinational collaboration such as oral presentation, discussion and negotiation, and professional networking (see Naungpolmak, 2017). In addition to the six 30-hour face-to-face seminars, the PCSL project's activities included online learning component in the form of webinars as well as the mock conferences (known as PCSL forums) aiming to reinforce learners' English skills in simulated contexts where multinational colleagues meet and collaborate (see more details in Damrongmanee, 2013; Limkomolvilas, 2016; and Nuangpolmak, 2017).

To ensure the successful delivery of PCSL training in all five Lower Mekong countries, orientation meeting for all participating English teachers was conducted at the beginning of each project year. At this meeting, newcomers received information about the project and the curriculum from the project manager. Continuing teachers from the previous year also served as experts to provide guidance on how to appropriately enact the curriculum. After a week-long formal orientation meeting, the participating English teachers, working in partnerships, returned to their respective contexts and continued to engage in informal peer-coaching relationship in order to succeed their shared tasks. For ten months, the co-teaching partners worked closely to plan, teach, and assess their local learners. Yet at another level, the teaching teams of the five countries collaborated in terms of resource pool. A shared Google Drive was established as a platform where materials, documents, and ideas were exchanged. In addition, the multinational teaching teams joined efforts twice a project year to run PCSL forums. In these events, the participating English teachers would still be working in partnerships but with someone from different teaching teams.

Furthermore, toward the end of the five-year project, more local teachers, especially from provincial areas, were recruited, in addition to the main local English trainers in partnership with the US English Language Fellows, to the project in order to create a multiplying impact. That is, in the fourth year of the project, the 'core' teachers started to train the newly recruited, mostly junior and inexperienced (recent graduates), teachers how to enact the PCSL curriculum properly and effectively. The intended outcome of this was twofold. First was to increase the number of people being trained by the PCSL curriculum beyond the pool of government officials in the

final year of the project. Second was to create a community of practice among the Lower Mekong English teachers from which the future of English learning and teaching in this sub-region could flourish. As the junior teachers came into the project in later years, they were encouraged to observe the PCSL training ran by the more experienced teachers before taking part in co-teaching the PCSL curriculum themselves.

Owing to its multifaceted components, the LMI PCSL project was embedded with seven desirable features of successful PD put forward by various scholars as follows:

1. Sustained Duration

Longer duration of PD naturally affords time for teachers to put new knowledge and/or skills into classroom practice and receive feedback for further learning (Garet et al., 2001). This try-out cycle allows "cumulative" learning of the same concept as well as multiple occasions to engage in the same practice. In addition, PD that spans over time lends itself to opportunities for deeper discussions among peers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017, p.15).

Participating in a long-term project such as LMI PCSL offers many opportunities for professional learning. First of all, after the initial orientation to PCSL curriculum, the teachers had multiple chances to engage with the syllabus and materials and became acquainted with them. In other words, the teachers could make sense of the content in small dosages, unlike attending a once-off workshop where new pedagogical ideas are often showcased overwhelmingly in a flash. Secondly, after each training session, the teachers were able to reflect on their performance and utilize feedback from their students to improve their next delivery. The repeated delivery of this curriculum six times per year also contributed to enhanced understanding of not only the content but also the pedagogy underpinning the PCSL curriculum. It is claimed that teachers learn best through their engagement with materials of practice (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Last but not least, since the PCSL training was held simultaneously in five countries, the interval between each training session also made possible the shared reflection and discussions among different teaching teams. The feedback from both teachers and students was effectively utilized in refining the curriculum throughout the five years. Simply put, the critical feature of time seemed to facilitate the enactment of the curriculum in both micro and macro levels.

2. Content Focus

While lectures and workshops may only provide generic information for desirable practice, PD content that addresses context-specific issues and is embedded in everyday practice can be more readily taken up by teachers. Furthermore, teachers' increased content knowledge is claimed to lead to improved practice and accordingly brings about greater students' achievement (Desimone, 2009).

At the heart of the PCSL design was a co-teaching model where English teachers (native-nonnative partnership) conducted the training. This co-teaching model naturally created an environment for participating teachers to utilize various language skills such as agreeing and disagreeing, negotiating, advising and reflecting which are also fundamental to any successful collaboration. Through their own cross-cultural communication and collaboration, the Lower Mekong EFL teachers could develop communicative competence in English as well as cultural awareness – two of the important characteristics that good language users should possess. In addition to enhanced English proficiency (i.e. content knowledge), the teachers could use this direct experience of language use to advise their own students.

3. Professional Coherence

Desimone (2009) posits that a good PD activity should be consistent with the current policy and aligned with social practice in the teachers' contexts. These two factors can influence how teachers interpret the value of PD activity and the extent that they will enact or resist what they learn from PD (Penuel et al., 2007). Coherence to policy ensures that teachers' pursuit and implementation of change after PD is sustained and not left without support (Van Veen et al., 2012).

The period when LMI PCSL was implemented was around the same time as the commencement of ASEAN (Association of South East Asia Nations) Economic Community, known as AEC. Leading up to December 2015 when AEC officially commenced, there was an urgent need in many ASEAN countries to boost up their population's English skills to cope with language disparities within ASEAN where one half of the member countries (e.g. Singapore and the Philippines) use English as a second language while the other (e.g. Thailand and Vietnam) use it as a foreign language. This gap in proficiency was believed to disadvantage the latter in terms of human resource capacity, especially when AEC brings about the free flow of labor within the region (Crocco & Bunwirat, 2014), and political and diplomatic presence in the regional stage (Dudzik & Nguyen, 2015). Accordingly, education policies around the region during that time were to promote English proficiency in all levels.

Since all of the participating teachers in PCSL worked in tertiary institutions, their routine jobs were to prepare graduates for future workplaces. It can be said that the goals of PCSL training fundamentally adhere to those of their routine teaching. In addition, the majority of the teachers were interested in participating in this project because their regular teaching was also involved with and/or based on the ESP approach. Through the delivery of PCSL training, the teachers were given the opportunities not only to polish their craft in ESP teaching, but also to expose to authentic language use by professionals of different expertise (Limgomolvilas, 2016). These knowledge and experience can in turn help improve their own teaching without interrupting the existing practice.

4. Active Learning

In the views of Lave and Wenger (1991), professional learning best takes place within the context of practice – or in their term 'situated'. In sharp contrast to the traditional form of learning where teachers are prescribed with generic knowledge, active learning promotes inquiry-based practice where teachers are directly engaged with interactive activities and authentic artifacts so as to encourage the "sense-making" process (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017, p.7). In order for teachers to be an agent of change in their own classroom, they first need to make sense of their PD experience which will later lead to the uptake of ideas from PD (Freeman, Reynolds, Toledo & Abu-Tineh, 2016).

English teachers who participated in the LMI PCSL project were provided with hands-on experience in implementing the PCSL curriculum themselves. They not only developed greater understanding of the curriculum content, but also refined their skills in delivering such content as their participation in the project continued on. As part of their work on this project, learning become embedded in their practice and the social context in which they partook (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Since one of the goals of LMI is to promote sustainable development in human capacity, the teachers' genuine advocacy of the curriculum, brought about by the active involvement with the curriculum itself, is likely to sustain its implementation in the long run.

5. Collective Participation

The social theory of learning emphasizes participation and membership of a community of practice as a process of learning. The three dimensions of practice; mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire, crucially promote learning within the community through negotiation of meaning (Wenger, 1998). Also, working collectively creates a trusting environment where problems and dilemmas about the shared practice can be discussed and reflected (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Most importantly, collective effort is claimed to be the main factor driving change and underlining its success (Penuel et al., 2007).

It could be said that the collaborative nature of the LMI PCSL project lent itself to the environment of professional learning. Despite being informally formed, the PCSL community became more strengthened as the project continued and more teachers got involved. Since all of the community members shared the same responsibility (i.e. successful delivery of the PCSL training), they are mutually accountable for their roles. Accordingly, knowledge exchange and negotiation constantly occurred within and between the partnerships. This sharing also extended beyond different cohorts of trainers throughout the five years of the project. The multifaceted collaboration of PCSL community members not only creates ample opportunities for learning, but also facilitates the change as the outcome of PD participation. That is to say, there are teams of Lower Mekong English teachers who can readily, and perhaps collectively, implement the PCSL curriculum in their own contexts. Furthermore, with the shared history, the network of these teachers can continue long after the project ended.

6. Coaching and Modeling

Experts can take many roles in PD activities, from being resource persons, moderating discussion groups, to modeling best practices (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Traditionally, coaching implies a novice/expert relationship where the experienced colleague initiates the novice into the profession. However, in a context where coaching suggests equal roles, it allows for one-to-one relationship between the two colleagues involved in a less hierarchically threatening fashion (Kennedy, 2005). Coaching can be seen as a form of scaffolding where the knowledgeable one assists the other in his/her learning. It is claimed that this guidance is crucial to the successful application of skills/knowledge gained from PD (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). In a similar vein, Lave and Wenger (1991) posit that practitioners learn to master knowledge and skills through the characteristics of their participation, generally moving from peripheral into full participation. Engaging in mentoring (coaching) relationship is believed to yield positive outcomes for both parties, especially in terms of professional self-efficacy (Budge, 2006).

The co-teaching model employed in PCSL naturally lent itself to peer-coaching relationship. The partnership between native and nonnative English speaker teachers utilizes the strengths of each party. The US English language fellows could be resource persons in terms of language for their nonnative speaker peers while the local teachers brought to the partnership their knowledge about learners and cultural context of learning. Through this, both parties not only gained knowledge and skills themselves, but also utilized these gains to improve their immediate practice (i.e. the PCSL training). It could be said that teacher learning in this case took place both 'from' and 'by' coaching. As for the junior Lower Mekong English teachers who were additionally recruited in the later phase of the project, their participation resembled that of Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion in that they started off peripheral (i.e. observing the experienced) and then became part of the practice (i.e. enacting the curriculum). Although their learning first derived from received coaching and modeling, the major part of learning still came from the full participation in the community of practice in the later stage.

7. Feedback and Reflection

According to Dewey's (1944) theory of learning, to experience something is to first do an action then undergo a consequence of that action, and in order to learn from experience, a person must constantly make connections backward and forward between actions and consequences to understand the meaning of that experience. Reflection is also concerned when feedback is given. Both works together to facilitate the internalization of knowledge. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) assert that constructive feedback is often generated, followed by reflection, during the activities where authentic instances of practice are involved such as lesson plan study or demonstration teaching. However, the element of time is crucial to this as teachers need time to reflect on the feedback given before they can make any changes.

English teachers participating in the LMI PCSL project constantly received feedback from their peers as part of the process of co-teaching and team-teaching. In addition, at the end of each 30-

hour training, each batch of learners provided evaluation (online questionnaire). Despite running six trainings each project year, the teaching teams had about three-to-five-week intervals between these seminars. Also, there were two-month breaks between each project year. The combination of both built-in feedback as part of the PCSL design and the longitudinal nature of the project allowed for teacher learning to occur through reflection of their own practices. Furthermore, for junior English teachers, the opportunities for reflection also came from their observation of teaching modelled by expert peers.

Implications for Future Design of Professional Development Activities

As suggested by characteristics of successful PD cited in literature, teacher learning tend to arise from their sustained and active engagement with peer community upon which genuine inquiry about practices can be built and within which mutual mentoring is born. In the field of teaching English as a second/ foreign language, there has already been a shift in perspectives toward teacher education where the formal transmission of knowledge, especially from top-down, is discouraged whereas teacher-initiated dialogues and bottom-up inquiries, situated within context of practice, are promoted (Crandall & Christison, 2016). Recent studies revealed that teachers' preference is also aligned with this shift in that English teachers view PD activities of participatory and collaborative nature such as action research, mentoring, study groups and community of practice as useful (Hismanoglu, 2010; Yurtsever, 2013; Yumru, 2015). However, teachers' PD needs and preference may vary depending on which career stage they are at (Topkaya & Celik, 2016). From this, it is implied that PD providers, whether it be government agencies or private organizations, should keep abreast with ever-changing global trends in English learning and teaching as well as local demands and interests. Unavoidably, specific in-service trainings must be organized to adhere to certain educational policies within each context (e.g. standard assessment) but more efforts should be made to empower teachers to constantly strive for their own professional development. Again, this could be facilitated by setting up a community where English teachers can be inspired by like-minded colleagues and gain positive influence from a peer group.

The intended outcome of organizing any PD activities is to improve job performance. Therefore, it is not surprising that the PD content related to teaching methodology (i.e. how to teach effectively) were most frequently offered (Freeman et al., 2016) as well as most sought after (Topkaya & Celik, 2016). However, Freeman (2016, p.178) postulates that knowledge of language teaching methods forms only one of four aspects of English teachers' "knowledge-for-teaching". Besides pedagogical knowledge which involves methodology in English teaching and understanding of second language acquisition process, competent English teachers must also possess good command of English as well as language awareness. In this sense, it is implied that English teachers should also engage in PD activities which can directly or indirectly promote their English proficiency. The teachers' enhanced proficiency can benefit the English classroom in twofold. First, teachers gain deeper understanding about the subject matter that they teach.

Second, they can improve the means of teaching; that is, to use English more confidently as medium of instruction. The latter is especially beneficial for nonnative English speakers who teach English as a foreign language. Furthermore, to raise language awareness, English teachers should be given opportunities to use the language in authentic contexts. They should also be exposed to different varieties of English. A collaborative project among multinational practitioners, such as LMI PCSL, would be a good venue where authentic English use, language awareness and cross-cultural communication competency can be simultaneously promoted. With the advent of technology, English teachers from different parts of the world today can communicate and collaborate virtually via various online communicative tools.

Concluding Remarks

Research into successful PD programs (Garet et al., 2001; Desimone, 2009; Van Veen et al., 2012; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017) has indicated seven common core characteristics among these programs, all of which were also featured in the LMI PCSL project as previously described. It is assumed that these features will promote opportunities for teacher learning which in turn will drive the change in beliefs and practice. The scope of this article is mainly to discuss how the design of LMI PCSL project created the PD opportunities for English teachers and how their experience from participating in the project may facilitate change in their practices. Nevertheless, empirical evidence about the actual impact would still be required to conclude the overall success of LMI PCSL project as a PD program for English teachers. What seems to be lacking in the five-year implementation of the LMI PCSL project was the assessment of immediate (i.e. short-term) learning gains of the participating teachers, albeit plenty of information collected from the learners' end, which could shed more light on whether the teachers were satisfied with their concurrent PD involvement. However, as Guskey (2000) contends, it may be more beneficial to examine the long-term impact of the participants' application of knowledge and skills learned from PD in their own contexts and the outcomes of such implementation after the PD program has ended.

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