

# **Professional Communities Among Teachers: A Summary of a Conceptual Framework.**

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**Abstract**

*This paper is a summary of some key points from a longer article by the same authors to be published shortly in the Polish Journal of Education Research.* It presents via an exploration of literature in this area a possible conceptual framework for understanding the professional communities that are built when teachers work together within projects and initiatives that cross workplace and even national boundaries. This paper presents a conceptualisation of three aspects of these professional communities. These are as follows: the ways in which teachers' self-efficacy may be shaped; the perceptions of membership that teachers may have; the types of knowledge shared. The full article that this summary paper is based on conceptualises two further aspects of community building: boundary creation and the role of individuality. This paper's contribution to the wider academic debate is that it can potentially inform empirical research into such communities that is currently taking place, via a wide range of projects, in universities across Europe and beyond. This framework presented here is currently being used by the authors to enable them to understand communities of teachers they are working with.

## **Introduction**

*This paper is a summary of some key points from a longer article by the same authors to be published shortly in the Polish Journal of Education Research.* The purpose of this summary, and of the longer article it is based on, is to provide a suggested conceptual framework for the understanding of professional communities. The article this is based on is a review of two genres of academic literature related to professional communities, these are: formally published academic research, and reports describing projects which have facilitated community building among teachers from different workplaces.

This summary paper is divided into three sections, followed by a conclusion. In the conclusion a diagram illustrating the conceptual framework that the paper builds towards is presented. The three sections are as follows:

- self-efficacy within a professional community.
- conceptualising community membership
- knowledge sharing within communities

### **(1) self-efficacy within a professional community**

Professional identity is socially constructed and must exist within a social context, usually a workplace. This makes it distinct from self-efficacy as it is built in other contexts, as in these contexts it can potentially be self-constructed in isolation (Chalari, 2017). Our professional identity is also built progressively over the length of our professional career as a whole and the time we have been in a single workplace (Teleshaliyev, 2014).

The behaviour of others within a social context can challenge or strengthen our identity and our self-efficacy (Wenger-Traynor & Wenger-Traynor, 2015). Teachers may retreat into rejection of the community that they are working within if it does not affirm them (Leeferink, Koopman, Beijgaard, et al., 2015), alternatively they may find that membership of a community, including a workplace community, enables them to assert and define themselves in positive ways (Stanley, 2012). In relation to this, whether a teacher's professional values and beliefs are compatible with the community plays an important role in the formation of self-efficacy (Tseng & Kuo, 2014).

There is an assumption in some research, that teachers simply find themselves working within a less conducive or more conducive community (Fullan, 2016). This is based on the nature of the community that exists within the workplace that they find themselves within. Thereby to

follow this through, whether a teacher is part of a more or less conducive community which builds their self-efficacy would be partly or largely a matter of chance (Orr, 2012). However, this seems to be an incomplete model for describing the professional journey of teachers (Joshevska, 2016). Frequently, from a position of integration within the heart of a localised community, teachers seek further challenges and participate in related but alternative communities that give them new experiences and new sources of inspiration (Frost, 2014).

Three concepts that therefore may present one aspect of a useful framework for understanding professional communities are as follows: (1) the presence or otherwise of affirming professional conversations and interactions within a community; (2) the role of accumulated affirmation over-time and the impact of this when moving towards a more central position in a community; (3) the possibility that teachers join and create communities in exploratory and pro-active ways whereby they deliberately seek and create conducive communities outside the workplace.

## **(2) conceptualising community membership**

Different types of professional community have different forms of membership from very tightly defined groups working closely together such as teachers developing lessons together in the Japanese system of lesson study to loosely bonded groups such as an international community of teachers, perhaps linked by a project in some way. These differing structures present different challenges in terms of recognising membership.

One issue faced by the more tightly knit form of community is that there may be tension between the building of community and valuing individualism (Saito & Atencio, 2015). Some good teachers define themselves in individual terms (Pedder & Opfer, 2013) and they may reject or place less significance on communities that put pressure on them to be collegial within pre-defined structures (Frost, 2015). Membership of such communities may be recognised without being valued. On the other hand, the potential membership of an international community of teachers, linked by some large-scale projects, may be so large and amorphous that it can be hard for a teacher to perceive it as a community at all (Santoro, 2014). One challenge for any form of community building, that is beyond the workplace, lies in ensuring its relevance in teachers' professional lives (Dogan, Pringle and Mesa, 2016).

Teachers are also members of some communities in a factual rather than an affective way. These factual memberships are acknowledged by them but are not interpreted into their identity. Research into the relevance of union membership for teachers in the United Kingdom

where union membership is nearly universal indicates that there are teachers who identify as political activists and for whom such membership is an active form of self-identification. However, there are many others for whom it can be defined as a known fact but one that has no impact on their self-perception (Popiel, 2013).

For teachers who choose to join communities beyond the workplace, It may be that working together collegially within a loose structure away from the normal structures of a school may enable creativity without containing the same potential threats to a teacher's individual self-efficacy (Joshevska & Kirandziska, 2017). Such communities may enable the teacher who has chosen for valid ethical and professional reasons to tread a more individualistic path within an institution to build collegiality within another aspect of their professional life (Frost, 2015). It may also enable those teachers who do not define themselves in individualistic ways but for whom the structures they work within promote isolation to perceive themselves as part of a community that they value and that they perceive to value them.

A possible typology of community membership that could be used to understand different professional communities could be: (1) factually acknowledged but professionally insignificant communities, (2) communities that provide affirmation, (3) communities that develop practice, (4) tightly bounded and pre-structured communities, such as a work place, (5) more loosely bonded communities that exist outside the workplace, membership of which may create space for flexibility and creativity. These may of course overlap and interact.

### **(3) knowledge sharing within communities**

An exploration into one community of teachers who were involved in a project that crossed national boundaries conducted between 2010-2017 built a typology of four types of knowledge that may be shared within a professional community (Underwood, 2017). These were as follows (1) knowledge of strategies, this is sharing specific and concrete classroom actions such as lesson plans or activities, (2) knowledge of practice, this refers to approaches to planning and designing lessons rather than specific classroom activities, (3) knowledge of values, this refers to pedagogical, ethical or cultural values that underpin the process of lesson design, (4) knowledge that affirms, which is knowing that one is a skilled professional gained from interaction with an audience of fellow professionals. These forms of knowledge were also found to be present in a range of reports on communities that linked teachers in projects outside the workplace (Teleshaliyev, 2014; Joshevska, 2016). All of these forms of knowledge were present in the discourse between teachers and in stories that teachers told about

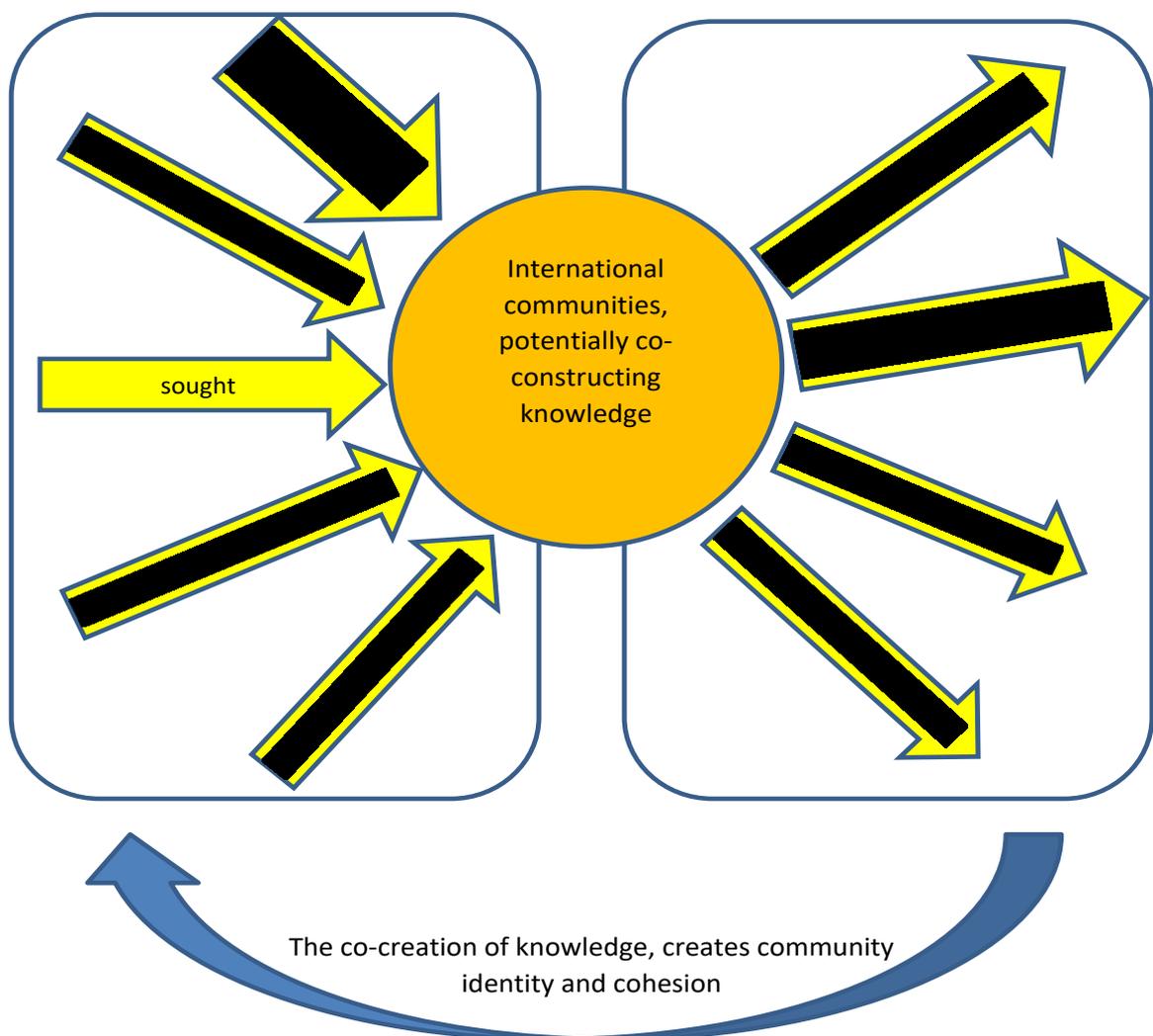
teaching. It seems therefore that when teachers engage in discussions about teaching that they share forms of knowledge beyond just teaching strategies. These other types of knowledge may even be valued more.

## Conclusion

*Diagram illustrating a conceptual framework for understanding communities of teachers*

*Community characteristics*

*The knowledge created*



In conclusion we have presented this diagram, above. At the heart of this diagram lies: significant communities co-constructing knowledge. Feeding into this are those characteristics that teachers may be seeking when they become involved in alternative communities. Flowing out of this community are the forms of knowledge that such a community may generate and that may be present in the discourse between teachers. The further long arrow at the bottom

of the diagram, curving back, illustrates how this process of sharing knowledge may be both an outcome of community engagement and a creator of community identity and cohesion.

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