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“Together we are better”: Professional learning networks for teachers

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, many educators have turned to professional learning networks (PLNs) to grow in their craft with peers who are more accessible online because of reduced temporal and spatial constraints. While educators have cultivated PLNs, there is a dearth of research about the effects of PLNs. This manuscript reports the findings of a qualitative study that investigated PLN experiences through the analysis of survey data from 732 P-12 teachers. Data analysis suggests that the anytime, anywhere availability of expansive PLNs, and their capacity to respond to educators' diverse interests and needs, appear to offer possibilities for supporting the professional growth of whole teachers. These findings have implications for defining the present and future of teacher learning in a digital age.

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The most important thing I learned [from my PLN] is that there is a community of enthusiastic amazing educators that are lifelong learners, always evolving their practice and learning from each other and from me. That was the kind of teacher I wanted to be but I didn't have the best role models of this around me. Once I found these communities online, especially on Twitter, I started being that force in person as well. I encourage my colleagues to share with me and I share with them. Together we are better.

- Female teacher from Canada in her 6th year

1. Introduction

The speed with which the Internet has arrived, evolved, and affected the lives of teachers and students of the 21st century is staggering. Scarcely a decade ago the quote above from the Canadian teacher would have been unlikely, but the arrival of Web 2.0 sites and social media platforms has facilitated anytime, anywhere learning occasions for teachers. With shortcomings in teacher professional development (PD) well documented (Opfer & Pedder, 2011), educators have increasingly

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used digital sites to cultivate and extend *Professional Learning Networks* (PLNs) to grow as educators. A PLN can be defined as a “system of interpersonal connections and resources that support informal learning” (Trust, 2012, p. 133).

While many educators claim to benefit from PLNs, much remains unknown about how teachers conceive of PLNs, what they learn from them, and how this affects their teaching and students’ learning. This manuscript reports the findings of a qualitative study in which we investigated teachers’ understandings of PLNs through the analysis of survey data from 732 teachers in Pre-Kindergarten to 12th grade settings. We begin by offering a theoretical lens that considers the complex processes of professional learning that supports *whole teachers*. We will review pertinent literature concerning PLNs and teacher learning. We then describe the data collection and analysis methods that yielded findings which suggest that PLN experiences support growth in affective, social, cognitive, and identity aspects of teaching. These findings have implications for (re)defining the present and future of teacher learning in the 21st century. We conclude by offering implications for research and practice, including suggestions that might help educators reflect upon participation in PLNs as a means to achieve professional growth.

2. Theoretical lens

While scholars have regularly called for the education of the whole child (e.g., Diamond, 2010; Miller, 2010; Noddings, 2010), particularly in early education, only recently have they suggested professional development that meets the needs of the *whole teacher* (Chen & Chang, 2006; Chen & McCray, 2012). Chen and colleagues proposed and implemented a theoretical framework for holistic teacher PD that sought to concurrently support teacher growth in attitudes, knowledge, and practices across various domains. Their integrated approach “is based on the premise that teacher attitudes, skills, and practices interact and influence each other. The dynamics of these interrelationships provide a basis for facilitating teacher development” (Chen & Chang, 2006; para. 5).

A whole teacher perspective reflects our view of teaching as a complex endeavor undertaken by professionals with cognitive, social, affective, and identity needs. In other words, like students, teachers “are whole persons—not mere collections of attributes, some to be addressed in one place and others to be addressed elsewhere” (Noddings, 2010, p. 5). If teachers are to continually develop their practice then they could benefit from broad, holistic, and flexible networks as they navigate shifting professional landscapes. The anytime, anywhere availability of expansive PLNs, and their capacity to respond to educators’ diverse interests and needs, appear to offer possibilities for supporting the professional growth of whole teachers.

3. Literature review

3.1. Teacher professional development

Quality PD experiences are believed by many scholars to be central to the improvement of teaching and student learning (e.g., Borko, 2004; Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Kennedy, 2016; Van den Bergh, Ros, & Beijaard, 2014), and they may even prevent teacher burnout (Wood, 2002). Many researchers agree that these types of experiences should be long-term, ongoing, social, constructivist, and situated in classroom practice (e.g., Desimone, 2009; Garet et al., 2001; Timperley & Alton-Lee, 2008; Van den Bergh et al., 2014). Yet, formal teacher PD often fails to meet such criteria.

Teacher PD has long been characterized by narrow aims that are disconnected from the broad, complex, and disparate needs of teachers (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Traditional PD often includes short workshops or seminars that feature outside experts and that occur away from teachers’ home schools. Although such PD can introduce teachers to important knowledge and skills, it can also often lack depth and tends to focus mostly on content knowledge (Chen & McCray, 2012; OECD, 2014). More recently, Mary Kennedy (2016) has highlighted the “problem of enactment” that can result from PD programs that meet with educators outside of their classrooms but expect teachers to enact what they have learned inside of their classrooms (p. 3).

Traditional efforts at PD have also failed to respect the agency and needs of classroom teachers. Apple (2009) argued that top-down teacher PD in schools often aligns with hierarchical structures that de-skill teachers from their intellectual work by treating them as passive recipients of mandates. Even the term “professional development” conveys that teachers are “deficient and in need of developing and directing” (Webster-Wright, 2009, p. 712). Aileen Kennedy (2005) argued that traditional PD initiatives rarely are designed based on how teachers learn, but are instead built on the premise that highly effective teaching results from mastering a set of technical skills. As a result, many teachers believe that the PD available to them is not useful (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009) or does not meet all of their professional needs (OECD, 2014). Where might teachers turn when their professional growth is stunted by poor traditional PD or school environments that fail to meet their needs?

Many teachers engage in different forms of informal PD, including study groups, Edcamp unconferences, classroom observations, and conversations with colleagues (Trust, 2015; Carpenter & Linton, 2016; Desimone, 2009; Eraut, 2004; Kynt, Gijbels, Grosemans, & Donche, 2016; Richter, Kunter, Klusmann, Lüdtke, & Baumert, 2011). Unlike traditional PD that often is driven by narrow aims, these more informal professional learning experiences can support the holistic needs of teachers. Informal learning opportunities allow educators to co-construct knowledge for their practice in collaboration with peers,

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