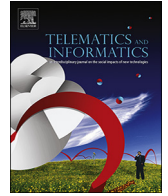


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## Exchanging social support on online teacher groups: Relation to teacher self-efficacy

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### ABSTRACT

The present study explored the relation between exchanging social support on online teacher groups and teacher self-efficacy. An online survey was conducted inside a massive Facebook teacher group, and 584 elementary school teachers provided information regarding Facebook use, self-efficacy for creative teaching, and the extent to which they provided and received support on the online teacher group. Results showed that teacher self-efficacy varied as a function of years of teaching experience, length of group membership, and the extent to which teachers provided and received social support on the online teacher group. Furthermore, the providing of online support predicted teacher self-efficacy after taking into account the effects of teaching experience and group membership. The findings are discussed in terms of the features and importance of social support exchange on online teacher support groups.

### 1. Introduction

In recent years, the Internet has provided new opportunities for schoolteachers to communicate with each other via online support groups, which appear in huge numbers with the flourishing of social media such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and MySpace. After joining an online teacher group, a teacher is able to exchange various forms of online social support with other teachers (Hart and Steimbacher, 2011; Kelly and Antonio, 2016; Staudt et al., 2013). Online social support differs in significant ways from social support in face-to-face situations. In online situations, for example, we cannot deliver support with the aid of physical contact (e.g., holding each other's hands). As such, social support provided by online teacher groups may not result in the same benefits afforded by face-to-face colleague support at school, which has been found to have positive influences on teacher performance and commitment (DeAngelis et al., 2013; Singh and Billingsley, 1998). On the other hand, social support from online friends is important and helpful to members of online support groups created for fighting tough illness, such as Parkinson's disease (Attard and Coulson, 2012), breast cancer (Bender et al., 2011; Winzelberg et al., 2003), diabetes (Greene et al., 2011), and eating disorder (Eichhorn, 2008). These findings suggest that exchanging social support with other teachers on online teacher support groups might as well bring forth positive benefits for teachers. Given that more and more teachers are using teacher support groups on social networking sites for professional reasons (Kelly and Antonio, 2016), it is important to examine whether there is an association between exchanging social support on online teacher groups and important indices of teacher performance.

Having positive self-efficacy beliefs is an essential characteristic for schoolteachers because teacher self-efficacy has significance on instructional practices, job satisfaction, and professional commitment (e.g., Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998; Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2007, 2010). There is evidence that teacher self-efficacy could be uplifted by observing teacher models or receiving positive feedback

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online (Hagen et al., 1998; Wang et al., 2004; Yoo, 2016). In other words, opportunities to communicate with teacher models and receive practical advice/suggestions are important to having positive teacher self-efficacy. One good way to acquire such opportunities is to join a well-developed online teacher group, on which many experienced and versatile teachers are active in exchanging various forms of social support with one another (Kelly and Antonio, 2016). Engagement in exchanging social support on the online teacher group is then likely to provide teachers with valuable vicarious experience and/or social persuasion that would help to enhance or maintain their job-related self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). The present study was carried out to examine a hypothesis that social support exchange on online teacher groups was associated significantly with teacher self-efficacy.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Online teacher support group

In recent years, the Internet has provided new opportunities for teachers to communicate and collaborate with one another via online teacher support groups that have proliferated on popular social media (Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace, etc.). On these online groups, teachers typically help one another by sharing tips for effective teaching or better classroom management, cheering up and comforting each other, or providing perspectives on educational topics and policies (Hart and Steinbrecher, 2011; Kelly and Antonio, 2016; Staudt et al., 2013). Schoolteachers participate in such online social exchanges for a number of motives: sharing emotions, utilizing the advantages of online environments, combating teacher isolation, exploring ideas, and experiencing a sense of camaraderie (Hur and Brush, 2009; Riding, 2001). In return, teachers would be able to gain opportunities to clarify their thinking about complex educational issues and make better-informed decisions about their professional practice (DeWert et al., 2003). Furthermore, teachers are likely to be rewarded by emotional support, decreased feelings of isolation, increased confidence and reflection, and improved problem-solving skills (DeWert et al., 2003). In general, members of well-developed online teacher support groups tend to have more access to information and teaching resources that are not available locally.

When an online teacher support group evolves to be a successful online community of practice, it has a great potential to empower its members and facilitate its members' professional development. Communities of practice refer to social entities comprised of practitioners of a particular domain who build and share expertise in social interactions on a relatively frequent basis (Lave and Wenger, 1990; Wenger, 1998). A community of practice evolves out of its members' need to accomplish tasks and to have learning avenues (Liedka, 1999). Within a community of practice, it is typical that different levels of expertise are simultaneously present among members. In this sense, many online teacher support groups can be regarded as online communities of practice, because they too are characterized with the above-mentioned important features (i.e., domain, social interaction, practical needs, provision of professional learning, and diverse levels of expertise). However, for an online teacher support group to become a successful community of practice, three other important elements are required. First, the online group needs to have one or a number of responsible moderators who frequently fine-tune and nudge discussion and learning in the right direction (Johnson, 2001). Second, the online group must allow for or encourage "legitimate peripheral participation" where newcomers or less experienced/knowledgeable members can lurk and observe more knowledgeable or longer participating members until they feel ready to contribute (Johnson, 2001; Kirschner and Lai, 2007; Lave and Wenger, 1990). Third, the online group must provide its members with a trusting and safe environment where learning would take place through corrective action and no one would be blamed for sharing irrelevant or erroneous information (Johnson, 2001). When an online teacher support group evolves to be a well-developed community of practice, its members would be more willing to explore within-group social relations, share ideas and information, and build collaboratively a repertoire of professional knowledge. Consequently, its members tend to find good solutions to problems, have less job-related stress, and feel more empowered at work. In short, the online teacher support group has facilitated, to some extent, its members' professional development.

### 2.2. Social support exchange on online teacher groups

Social support refers to resources available to an individual at times of need (Sarason and Sarason, 2009; Wills and Ainette, 2012). Exemplified by the act of sharing information, giving positive feedback, or expressing caring, love, and trust (House, 1981), social support is always intended to be helpful and is often delivered in a caring, trustworthy, and respectful manner (Heaney and Israel, 2008). Social support has direct as well as buffering effects on the well-being of individuals (Cohen and Wills, 1985). It could directly improve an individual's overall well-being irrespective of whether the individual is under stress, by providing him/her with positive affect, a sense of predictability and stability, and a recognition of self-worth (Cohen and Wills, 1985). It could also protect (buffer) individuals from potentially harmful stressors, by altering their appraisal or reappraisal of the stressors, enhancing their ability to access resources, increasing their confidence to cope with the stressors, and thus attenuating the negative impact of the stressors on them (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Research indicates that support from school colleagues is important for teachers in general (Singh and Billingsley, 1998) and for novice teachers in particular (DeAngelis et al., 2013; Jones et al., 2013; Kardos et al., 2001).

Social support also can be exchanged and transmitted in online interactions over the Internet and is referred to as 'computer-mediated social support' (Walther and Boyd, 2002; Wright and Bell, 2003) or 'online social support' (Dietrich, 2010; Tang et al., 2016). Online social support has several advantages, such as the likelihood of simultaneous multiple sources, flexibility in the timing of seeking and providing, and capacity of receiving and providing it within one's own home or workplace (Wright, 2000). Research indicates that online social support is particularly important and helpful to members of online support groups dedicated to fighting certain illness (Attard and Coulson, 2012; Bender et al., 2011; Greene et al., 2011; Winzelberg et al., 2003). In addition, both the

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