

# **Building communities among teachers: the experiences of teachers from Macedonia of engagement in extended communities.**

Authors

Dr James Underwood, University of Northampton

Majda Joshevska, Step by Step, Macedonia.

## **Abstract**

This paper is based on the findings from three related studies into the perceptions of teachers from Macedonia of the extended professional communities that they belong to. All these studies involved as participants teachers who can be defined as globally engaged, extended professionals. By this we mean teachers who were engaged of their own volition in communities of professionals that extend beyond the school that they work in. The nature of the communities that these teachers have engaged in is varied: ranging from formally created initiatives run by universities, to NGO led training and development projects to self-generated online communities of teachers. The research that the two writers have conducted and which is referred to in this article has explored the motives that teachers have for engaging in such communities, the ways engagement shaped their professional identity, the forms of relationships built, and the affordances and obstacles these teachers faced.

## **Introduction**

This paper is written by two researchers, exploring related aspects of teachers' knowledge sharing, communities and teacher empowerment. It therefore consists of a synthesis of their research findings, from a range of studies that they have conducted (Underwood, 2017; Joshevska, 2012; 2015; 2017). Rather than present this research based upon each project, this paper consists of an exploration into commonalities and links that the two writers found when comparing these studies. The methods used in each study are varied. They specifically include semi-structured interview, unstructured interviews and survey conducted via questionnaire. One study that has been synthesised into this document was a doctoral study (Underwood, 2017). This study was conducted via interview. Five participants from Macedonia were

interviewed all of whom had taught in Macedonia, still worked in education and who had engaged in networking projects with other teachers that extended beyond their school community. The method used was semi-structured interview. A better term for these though may be Rubin and Rubin's (2012) term 'focused' interview which more accurately describes the very loosely structured and wide-ranging nature of the conversations that were enabled. These interviews were then coded using NVIVO, with codes emerging from the data. These codes formed the basis for the analysis and discussion in the original larger study and have also informed this paper.

The data from the other studies this paper considers, refer to research connected to the implementation of the USAID funded "Readers are Leaders" project. The project was implemented between 2013 and 2018 in 90 primary schools in Macedonia where one of the undertaken activities was the creation of teacher-leadership based professional learning communities<sup>1</sup>. Initially the argument that teacher leadership - based learning communities could be a model to redefine teachers' professional identity was explored within the interviews conducted as a part of a master thesis (Joshevska, 2012). The data derived from this research informed the design of the USAID RAL Learning Community component. Hence, the 90 learning communities that were established followed the teacher leadership methodology developed by the Leadership for Learning network at Cambridge University as part of the International Teacher Leadership Initiative (Frost, 2011). The two sources of data informing the arguments in this paper are, first, a survey of teachers, who were learning community members, conducted in 2016. The second source is the project's final 'monitoring and evaluation report' that produced qualitative and quantitative data to explain teachers' and mentors' experiences regarding the learning communities. Data that informed the monitoring and evaluation report included a survey and focus groups with the teachers, who were members of the learning communities, and with the learning community mentors. These focussed on the benefits, opportunities and constraints of membership of a school-based, extended, learning community.

The first section of this article following this introduction is the presentation of a conceptual framework, informed by research and theoretical literature. This literature is of two types. Firstly, theory building literature within this field and secondly reports into such projects and

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<sup>1</sup> Implemented by the Foundation for Education and Cultural Initiatives "Step by Step" - Macedonia  
<https://www.stepbystep.org.mk/en/proekt-ral>

the teachers' experiences of being part of them. This presents an outline of concepts that the authors used when conducting their own studies and when presenting this synthesis. Following from this common themes have been identified that link these synthesised studies.

In the further sections of this article, findings from the linked studies are cross-compared, and analysed within the context of the concepts presented here. Following from this recommendations for practice and policy have been made.

### **Conceptual framework**

The communities of practice model, has influenced almost all research into the nature of professional communities since it was first introduced in 1998 (Wenger, 1998). This model describes how community members begin in a peripheral role as gainers of the knowledge that the community holds and move over a period of time towards a more central role in which they define the knowledge of the community (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). One role that a community of practice has, according to this model, is that it is a place of affirmation. Those who hold central roles affirm the newer members by demonstrating an understanding and appreciation of the expertise of more peripheral members, thus enabling them to move deeper into the community. Simultaneously those in peripheral roles reinforce the acknowledgement of the expertise of more experienced members by learning from them.

This model was shaped by research into workplace communities. However, it does not fully address what happens next with those community members who have attained this central position of mastery, a role in which they primarily affirm and shape the knowledge of others. It is unclear from this model whether the attainment of mastery in a community is simply the end point or whether a proactive seeking of other additional, alternative communities and roles then takes place. Whether once this position of mastery has been attained, professionals join other extended communities to receive knowledge and affirmation themselves.

The benefits of community membership for teachers has been stressed by both the UK and Macedonian government (Underwood, 2017; Joshevska, 2017). Positive traits attributed to it include a presumption that it will build resilience, enable creativity and lead to the sharing of expertise. Belonging to a professional community, where knowledge is being shared and co-constructed is a formative element of teachers' professional identity and teachers' professionalism. An affiliation to a community of practice is one of the characteristics that has

been used to define an 'extended professional', which is a classification Hoyle (2008) uses to describe teachers who have a more rational approach to teaching, voluntarily expand their role beyond classroom practice and place their professional contribution into a more global professional community (Joshevska, 2012).

On the opposite side of this spectrum is the identity of the 'restricted professional' who, despite the slightly inferior allure of the term, also describes a dedicated professional, but one who is more of a natural-born teacher, intuitive practitioner whose sanctuary is the classroom and for whom teaching is closer to an art or craft, rather than a deliberate activity constantly improved through professional development outside the realm of their classroom (Joshevska, 2012).

Building from this definition of an extended professional, there is considerable evidence that suggests that those teachers who embrace collegiality most strongly are often most resilient (Baker-Doyle et al., 2012). Teachers for example, even when developing a strong individual identity may simultaneously find it helpful to share stories about the process of teaching, which then might help to fuse an individualistic experience into a collective process (Lingard, 2009; Biesta, 2012). Research has also described how experienced teachers often choose to belong to more than one professional community at any given time, including both locally based communities and more disparate ones (Nishino, 2012).

The local community may well be the one that teachers identify with most strongly and may be the one where practice and meaning are most deeply shared (Kinman, Wray & Strange, 2011). However, the professional gains in terms of improvement in practice or affirmation may also be potentially limiting and narrow. On the other hand engagement with a more broadly defined extended community may potentially break the inherent limitations of the local (Lee, 2011). Affirmation and imagination may have a greater role and it may be these rather than practice that can be sustained and developed in this context. Envisaging a larger community with a broader vision may potentially empower teachers to perceive themselves as part of a community that exists beyond those that they are directly involved with on a day to day basis and to value themselves and their professional role more.

However, others while not rejecting the possibility of this have raised concerns regarding risks that may emerge if collegiality is enforced or contrived (Hargreaves et al., 2014; Frost, 2015). Also even if perceived as a positive, this ideal of collegial working described above is not consistently enabled by the reality of teachers' working lives in many countries. In terms of

sharing knowledge by observing, this is for most teachers a relatively rare experience. In many countries including both England and Macedonia, which form the focus of this paper, teachers are frequently observed in their earliest training years but even in this circumstance beyond the earliest stages of training rarely teach together.

After this initial period, teaching is an unusually isolated profession with teachers working alone in individual classrooms, typically observed just once a year or at most a handful of times (Pedder & Opfer, 2013). Whilst it is true that schools internally and in conjunction with universities often create some opportunities for peer observation or other shared learning experiences, these are likely to form a very small proportion of any teacher's professional working year and only impact on a small minority of teachers (White, 2013). Therefore, the experiential aspect of a teacher's professional learning and identity building happens as much in isolation as it does collegially (Taber, 2009).

As well as these structural limitations, there are also further conceptual limitations to the possibility of teachers building knowledge collegially. The complex nature of teachers' knowledge means that it is not necessarily the case that this knowledge can be easily shared with others (Guzman, 2009). However, if an extended community of teachers is perceived as a community of empowerment or affirmation rather than of practice then the relatively infrequent contact or, the difficulties of directly transferring practice become less significant issues.

To this extent it is also possible that exactly who we build a relationship with also becomes less important. The particular teachers from other countries may be more significant as representatives of a broader community enabling teachers to envision their own place and value rather than as specific individuals with specific practice to share or meanings to co-create (Paik et al., 2015). These 'boundary encounters' (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015) between those distinct enough in their professional context to challenge our personal meanings but related enough in their professional role to make this challenge comprehensible, can perhaps have an impact on defining our own professional identity. However, this may be without necessarily leading to the building of a community of practice (Paik et al., 2015).

In conclusion to this section, the challenges presented in developing and sustaining different types of professional community vary enormously depending on the type of community being referred to: local or distant, small or large, created for a specific purpose or naturally occurring. In terms of an international community of teachers it is possible that rather than a community

of practice it could be a community of shared affirmation that can be recognised, developed, and sustained. In which case the definitions of success, the significance of different activities and the role this community plays in people's working lives would be significantly different as would the challenges involved in sustaining and developing it. The strength of such a community may not be that meanings are shared but rather that personal meanings are reflected upon and clarified in an independent way.

### **Impact on local communities**

In this section we discuss extracts from the findings from the different studies mentioned earlier as regards the perceptions teachers had of the impact that they could potentially have on local communities via membership of extended professional communities. As this paper is a synthesis of larger studies brief extracts have been presented from each.

In the study conducted by Underwood (2017) the participants consistently described how the communities that existed beyond the workplace that they had sought membership of were significant as they enabled them to innovate and exercise leadership. We have included two quotes below from this study. The quotes, below, illustrate the local impact, that being members of these extended communities, had enabled the teachers to have. Both quotations illustrate how through being part of a community that stretched beyond the workplace, region and in some cases even national boundaries these teachers had found a local, community of more innovative and globally engaged teachers. In the participants' cases, across this whole study, this community often did include teachers within their own school but it did not include all of them and it also included others working in other schools in Macedonia and even in other countries:

*There is a group within the school that is more open minded and they just don't have problems with their experience and knowledge and everything, they discuss, they are asking just as I am discussing and asking, so we are on the same level, we can talk about it but it is not all of them and in many ways my school is a bit closed, not supportive. But most of my experiences, I don't know. I think that I am taking ideas away from innovative and creative teachers that I am meeting all around: in my school or at some different event where I am meeting them. 'Step by Step', things like that.*

As this quotation illustrates. This teacher welcomed the opportunity to meet with peers to share creativity rather than simply to learn new teaching strategies. Similarly this quotation reveals how membership of extended community went on to inform the nature of the local and school based community in empowering ways.

*With the first group, with the pilot group we had a lot of that kind of change, we had testimonials from a lot of people that say I have learnt to love my profession again, or I have realised why I became a teacher in the first place, which are very powerful and show a change in self-perception, or identity. And I think, that it had a lot to do with the fact that teachers were free to choose whatever they wanted to work on, they are not simply told: you are going to work on literacy and numeracy. That was a factor, maybe it wasn't the most important thing, but it was an important thing. So one of the things we also do in the component is that we set up networking meetings in several schools. They really enjoyed these, because they get out of the town or the villages. We especially have been most successful with, smaller rural schools and such. After this then the connections are with the teachers nearby and in the same school too but it starts by getting out of the school.*

In the studies by Joshevska (2015; 2016) belonging to a professional group as described in the section above underpins the possibilities to network and share experiences. Part of the objectives of the creation of learning communities in Macedonia was organizing networking events. These were meetings of several learning communities from different schools where teachers were asked to showcase their activities. They were also places where the teachers were given the opportunity to discuss strategies for improvement or scaling-up of certain activities on a school or community level. Both mentors and teachers reported finding the networking events very useful for strengthening the cooperation between teachers and establishing cooperation with the wider community. The open-ended structure of the events allowed all participants to present their accomplishments in a creative way, promote teachers' personal and collective successes on a larger level and ultimately gain professional self-confidence.

*It is not only about networking; the event is important for the entire region. Everyone is involved and engaged. In this way, the networking event brings the school closer to the community (Learning Community Mentor)*

*(Networking event) is the crown of our achievements – now we shall show what we have done! (Learning Community Mentor)*

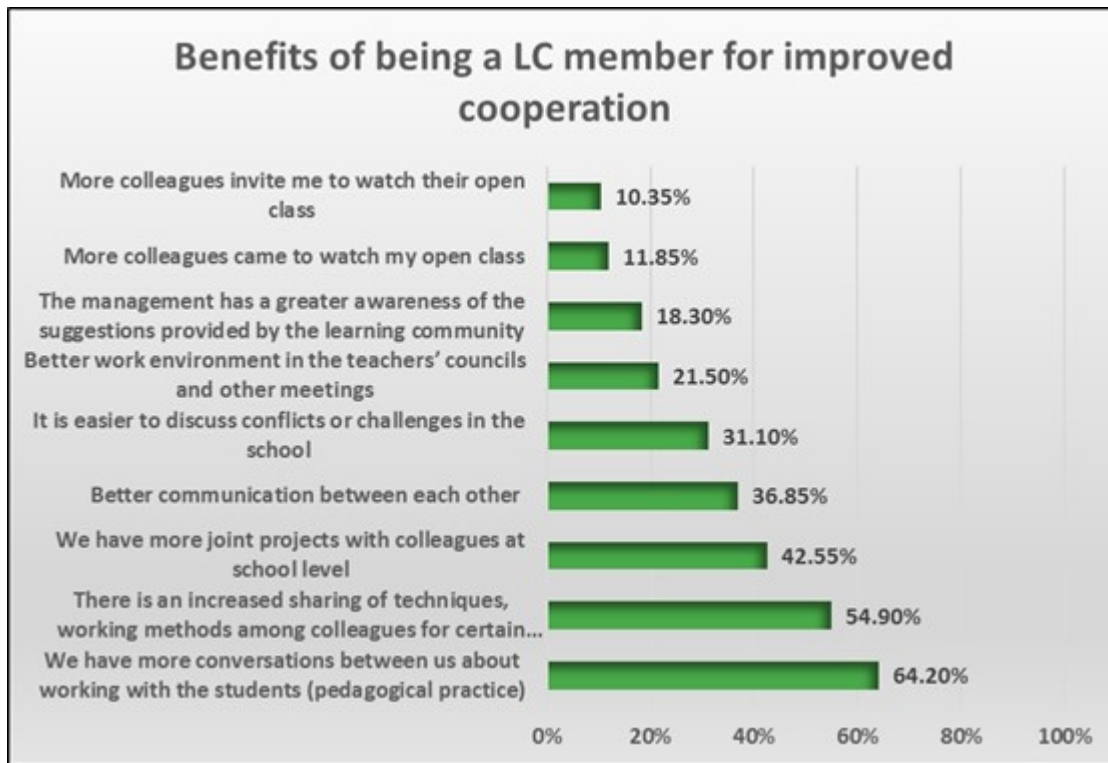
*After the networking event in Gostivar, the municipal sector of public affairs said the event was very interesting and they propose to become part of the municipal program, (Learning Community Mentor)*

As has been illustrated by these quotations, this interaction between strengthening the local community through involvement in an extended community was revealed in the interview study conducted by Underwood (2017) and also in the focus group research conducted by Joshevska (2015). This possibly suggests that while one outcome of extended communities is strengthening the extended community itself an equally important outcome may be connecting, affirming and re-invigorating local communities including those within a single workplace. Teachers may discover commonalities with teachers next door and the confidence to exercise leadership within a localised context by initially breaking the boundaries of the local.

### **The opportunities of community membership**

This section builds on the last by focusing further on the opportunities that teachers' perceived as available to them through involvement in extended professional communities. The perceived benefits that come from belonging to a learning community, as described by the participants in the study by Joshevska (2015, 2017) include, above all others, improved cooperation. This broad concept in turn can be broken down into: initiating conversations among teachers about pedagogical practice (64%), an increased sharing of teaching techniques (55%) and an increase in the number of joint projects (43%). This is revealed in the graphic below, along with other further opportunities that teachers perceived. Interestingly as this illustrates, the exchange of knowledge was largely facilitated by a process of discussion rather than direct observation. There was a significant increase in the sharing of ideas and enabling of each other as professionals via communication but not via observation. This fits with Frost's (2015) view that the knowledge of experienced teachers exists and is created in the discourse between teachers.





Regarding their professional development, the surveyed teachers described how through community membership they were finally able to feel that what they did for improving student learning was important and appreciated (51%). As well as this they described how planning was easier as members of such a community and how teachers within these communities had more courage to solve practical challenges (40%), while the advice from fellow teachers was perceived as more useful (31%). Furthermore, teachers also preferred turning to their colleagues for advice rather than expecting advice from other places.

These quotations illustrate this further through the teachers' voices:

*At the beginning there was some resistance. However, membership of the Learning Communities is on a voluntary basis, so only teachers that really wanted to be part of it were involved. For the first time, teachers understood they could do something for themselves. Previously, no one asked them about the challenges of their work and now they can detect problems, discuss issues and expand their network through Facebook, (teacher, Learning Community member)*

*The main benefits are personal and professional development, improved cooperation among the colleagues in one school and the colleagues from other schools, applicable*

*knowledge, great satisfaction. We never had before such cooperation, but now we talk about our common problems, (teacher, Learning Community member).*

*The project allowed us to feel as teachers – leaders, to be able to identify a problem, to research it, to work on it and to think of practical solutions in a certain time. This gave us self-confidence, (Learning Community teacher)*

Similarly in the study by Underwood (2017) within the extended communities that these teachers had sought and had become members of, all the teachers felt that there were commonalities which led to mutual recognition of each other as professionals. These two quotations below describe this well:

*There are a lot more commonalities than there are tensions. In fact, once you disclose to each other that you are teachers, it is as if you know you are sisters from another mother. The frustrations are the same, what is interesting is that we usually end up discussing the same things (Macedonian Teacher)*

*It may well be the case that teachers want to establish themselves as individuals within their own space of the classroom, to have a perception of self-efficacy and also want to build positive collegial relationships. It is also possible that membership of a professional community enhances practice on an individual level even if practice isn't directly copied (Macedonian Teacher)*

As all these studies reveal belonging to a local or an international professional community can provide an opportunity to practice leadership and to embody 'extended professionalism'. This is useful for both the empowerment of teachers and for improving the quality of education. Teachers in all three studies expressed the need or desire for forging cooperation with other teachers in a positive, stable, trusting working environment where teachers are treated equally with regards to their value in the school. Therefore, this suggests that schools should nurture a learning culture where shared knowledge is valued, viewing different professional experiences as valuable in order to inspire creative solutions to classroom issues.

### **Opportunities and non-positionality**

One of the ideas behind the success of such collaboration, in the macedonian context, is the non-positionality of the leadership within such communities (Frost, 2015). Non-positional leadership as defined in this context refers to the enabling of teachers to be able to lead and demonstrate leadership through their own agency, self-efficacy, beliefs, and professional confidence. In the study by Underwood as the quotation below illustrates this was a circular process whereby the confidence to initiate leadership and the affirmation that came from this then led to the building of identity as a leader and to embed leadership in practice.

*Because the group, the environment is different with this initiative that we are working on, that is the great thing we are offering teachers we are asking them for opinions and to make many other suggestions. And that is how I can see that the teachers are thrilled. They are thrilled because we ask their opinion, putting them in a position to cooperate with others, to find solutions ..... so yes to be a teacher and a leader (Macedonian Teacher).*

The studies by Joshevska (2015, 2017) similarly described teachers who had initiated innovation as a process which is beneficial for their whole school and not merely as a vehicle that serves self-promotion. This reflects a solution to a concern that is frequently voiced by Macedonian teachers. The second important formative aspect revealed in Joshevska's (2015, 2017) studies lies in the co-construction of knowledge by teachers who have different experiences with regard to the same context and thus are equally capable of leading innovation based on experience rather than position. Within the Macedonian context, promoting school-based professional development opportunities that are teacher led is potentially an opportunity to strengthen teachers' professional identity in two ways. Firstly, it provides a connective tissue between the fragmented training of teaching strategies, learned through incidental and sporadic professional development opportunities. By doing this it creates shared understanding and adapted practices that are relatable to their professional reality (Frost, 2015). Secondly, contextualized forms of professional development that are based on collaboration and collegiality promote mutual trust, collective self-efficacy and teachers' agency (Frost, 2014). These together move teachers towards reclaiming their professionalism. Furthermore as a more established professional body, teachers could become more vocal about their profession and put themselves on the map regarding shaping the policies that define teachers' roles in the system.

## **Obstacles and constraints**

There are however, significant obstacles to embedding a culture whereby teachers belong to extended professional learning communities as an expected norm. Belonging to a professional learning community is currently somewhat viewed as a professional luxury for many teachers in Macedonia. This is partly because of government reforms that happen on an annual level and are seemingly always accompanied by additional administrative work, which leaves little space for intrinsically driven improvement which is the objective of professional collaboration.

Also despite many initiatives that have been initiated with the intention of creating an almost exclusively collaborative knowledge base, several dangers arise from indiscriminately collectivising the profession. Firstly, the Macedonian system is a system in which there is very little formal recognition of professional development, meaning most teachers are equally appraised (gain similar salaries) despite different levels of engagement. In these circumstances it becomes difficult to be enthused about committing to such a potentially labour intensive endeavor as belonging to a professional learning community is. In other words, the goal to be the best professional lies almost exclusively in the intrinsic motivation of a small percentage of people who are more often that not, a minority within a school. This would not be such a significant issue had it not been the case that several interviewed teachers (Underwood, 2017; Joshevska, 2012) reported being shunned by their own colleagues because undertaking more classroom innovation, or establishing a new school practice was perceived with distrust as an unnecessary attempt to 'raise the bar' for quality teaching.

*Sometimes my colleagues don't accept it [classroom innovation] because it means that they would have to do the same, it raises the criteria. And sometimes, I know it's not a nice thing to say, but I feel like they envy me..." (Teodora, primary school tea)*

Secondly, the previously mentioned distrust that overshadows relationships within many sectors of Macedonian society (due to a legacy of political and, at one point, ethnic tensions) casts doubt for many teachers regarding the process of co-constructing knowledge in itself. Learning communities represent a fine balance between empowering the individual teacher and creating a stronger, more relevant knowledge base for the whole profession. However, the

operative aspects of maintaining this fine balance, of how individual recognition and collective attribution will be divided and appraised creates confusion and reluctance among teachers to contribute generously towards the co-development of others.

Possibly the solution to the fear that somebody will run away with all the credit, so to say, lies in the fact that learning communities are (or at least should be) comprised of ‘extended professionals’. This should mean that they are small, close-knit groups of colleagues whose communication is amicable and primarily for the purpose of improving the school learning culture. Most importantly, at least in the initial phases until the learning community becomes embedded in the school culture, is having leadership in the school, that the teacher works in, which recognises and rewards professional collaboration. Macedonian learning community mentors and teachers asserted that a key element for learning community sustainability is the engagement of school directors. Whenever the school director was supportive and diligent regarding the work of the learning community in their schools, so were the teachers..

*When the learning community were established almost all teachers applied to participate as members. However, as the meetings progressed teachers slowly withdrew. The key was the director. When the school director did not participate, teachers gave up. When the school director had a positive opinion and supported the teachers, they were all involved in it. (Learning Community Mentor)*

These quotations above are all from the USAID Readers are Leaders, Monitoring and Evaluation study (2018). However, the interview study by Underwood (2017) revealed similar viewpoints. This quotation below illustrates how these participants had retreated from her school community, in order to innovate, whilst simultaneously being prepared to engage in communities that extend beyond the school:

*The sad circumstances is that nowadays a lot of phenomenal teachers who after twenty, twenty-five years, you know how salaries work, right, who have checked out, who are saying ‘ok, if this is what the local ministry, what the sort of verification agency wants, we will do that’, and who treat their job sadly as if they work in a bank, or as if they are a civil servant, checks in and then checks out, which is very, very sad (Macedonian Teacher)*

*The thing is that I set up my mind not to worry about what is going on in my whole school and that is why I am working in my classroom and everything, my energy and creativity and everything, is focused on my classroom (Macedonian Teacher).*

These two quotations are illustrative of how most, although not all, the participants in the study by Underwood (2017) described how they themselves and the teachers who they worked with were distinct from their whole school community. In all cases though, even when they perceived the school more positively, they still perceived themselves as part of a smaller community of ‘innovative’ or ‘outward looking’ teachers, distinct from the school community as a whole.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

It is clearly the case that the workplace community is significant for teachers. In all the studies referred to in this paper those participants who described working in positive and conducive workplaces were pleased to do so. Therefore, this article is not suggesting that striving to improve the quality of collegiality and professional community within a workplace has no value. However, those teachers who did not work in workplace contexts that they saw positively still retained self-efficacy and an identity as, expert professionals, as long as this was affirmed by membership of alternative professional communities not bounded by the workplace. This research therefore suggests that to emphasise the quality of the workplace community above all others would be over-simplistic.

None of the participants described their workplace as being the most important professional community that they belonged to and therefore this suggests that neither should this be the only community that positional leaders and policy makers in education should focus on. It may be that in order to develop approaches that would lead to such universally acknowledged positive outcomes as; staff retention and school improvement, strategies need to be devised that enable teachers to engage in communities other than the workplace in positive and affirming ways. These could potentially include ways that enable them to exercise leadership and to co-construct purpose as well as share strategies.

### **Recommendations for policy**

Key partners in this endeavour are the school, and the various structures within it, as well as educational authorities outside the school. It is crucial that school management, county officials and governments realise that school-based leadership in innovation and professional development is favourable for everybody involved. If teachers are in charge of the creation and sharing of knowledge, professional development becomes: more cost-effective; addresses better the specific needs of the school and is more likely to become effectively embedded in the school ethos. Furthermore, this would increase teachers' control over their practice and would create a sense of ownership and protection for their profession, which is crucial for maintaining a positive professional identity.

Such processes do already exist but they tend to be small scale, impacting upon only a few schools or teachers within a school, and often requiring a significant commitment from teachers in terms of time or resources. There would be practical implications to this, if this were to be enabled for more than a few. This would be a distinct process to manage compared to improving the community within a workplace. It would involve a high level of professional trust and also acknowledgment of this in the opening up of space to develop such communities. This is because if there is an emphasis placed upon teachers to be part of structures that facilitate dialogue within a school then the effect may be that it limits the space and time for teachers to find and create the alternative community that this research suggests they will find most affirming.

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